NOVEL
03
WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
ILLUSTRATED BY
Monda
TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

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"You never know. You might get fed up and wish you'd never gone through with this engagement."
I fell because you're you. I want you, Leon. Be my husband.
"That won't happen. We love you because of who you are."

"You idiot. If you had the energy to cry yourself to sleep, you should have just walked."
Marie's older brother had returned. He scooped her up for a piggyback ride. Her younger self looked so relieved as she slept safely against her brother's back. Drool dribbled from her mouth, soaking into his shirt. Marie figured he'd start cursing again, but instead...
"Why do you rely on me like this?" He smiled faintly.
Marie pressed a hand close to her heart and squeezed it into a fist. Now she remembered—her brother had a filthy mouth, but he was kind.

Trapped in a Dating Sim
The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs

NOVEL
03

WRITTEN BY
YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY
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Seven Seas Entertainment

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS (LIGHT NOVEL) VOL. 3

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Illustrations by Monda

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MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-295-0
Printed in Canada
First Printing: September 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Prologue

WHAT IS LOVE?

If you're wondering who's contemplating such a philosophical question, that would be me, Leon Bartfort, a reserved but serious young man with black eyes and black hair.

After reluctantly playing a certain stupid otome game in my previous life, I died and got reincarnated into the game as an incredibly average male academy student. At least, that was my original fate, but for some reason I had recently been promoted all the way to viscount. *Ugh.* On top of that, I had also moved up in the court and now stood at lower-fourth ranking. No mere academy student should have had to deal with such prestigious status.

And thus, I contemplated love.

There's this trope in stories where love is the answer or whatever—all the protagonist needs to save the day is love, it's the key to everything, etc. This exact trope played out in the plot of the otome game I was now trapped in. In the plot, Luxion couldn't defeat the final boss on his own; the protagonist and her love interests bested it through the power of love, thus earning themselves a happily ever after.

If that held true, then in this world, the power of love superseded everything; it rivaled even the most advanced weaponry. It could solve what diplomacy couldn't. As long as you had love, nothing could get in your way. What an astounding, magnificent emotion! All you need is love!

How twisted is this world that the most powerful endgame weapon is—of all things—love?!

That aside…

"Why did this happen?" I moaned.

"It's all your fault," said my companion. Luxion looked like a metallic, ball-shaped robot with a single red eye, but his real self resided in a spaceship equipped with artificial intelligence. He used this softball-sized contraption as a portable terminal.

Also, absolutely none of this was my fault.

Given that he considered me his master, he owed me more respect. He was a capable companion nonetheless, although rather terrifying if left to his own devices. He got his jollies saying things like, *I'm going to annihilate all the new humans!* Who knew what he'd do if I didn't keep an eye on him?

I turned to the mountain of letters on my desk. One of the dormitory staff had just delivered the impressive pile to my room.

"I guess it's kinda refreshing to see how easily they all flip-flop," I muttered. Every single one of these letters had come from a girl in the academy's higher class, and every single one had a condescending tone. Some of the more audacious letters outright ordered me around with stuff like, *You will prepare a tea party for me three days hence*.

When I'd invited these girls to tea before, they hadn't even batted an eyelash in my vague direction. Now that I had real status, they sure had been quick to change their tune.
"This is pretty cruel," I sighed.
It disgusted me, actually. For a bit, I thought it'd be funny if all the girls who spurned me suddenly did a one-eighty and started clamoring for my attention instead, but the reality of it sucked.
"Your promotion during winter break was doubtless the deciding factor," said Luxion.
The Principality of Fanoss had attacked us during our second-term school trip. I'd managed to fend them off, but my accomplishments during the battle had led to yet another promotion. Thanks to that, when I returned to the academy, the girls had all done a complete about-face.
"They're not interested in me personally." I sighed. "They just want my status and fortune. This blows."
"I don't see any point in fussing over feelings. This is about marriage between nobility. In fact, you should take a look at this letter here."
A single envelope floated my way. I snatched it up and pulled out the letter. My rotten partner had the ability to scan the contents without even needing to break the seal. *That sure is convenient.*
"What, is there something funny in here?"
After scanning the page, I found it no less repulsive than the rest. The sender had detailed their conditions for marriage, including a manor in the capital where her dozen or so servants could live, as well as a demand that I financially support her numerous lovers.
The girl who sent this can't be in her right mind, can she?
Much as I wanted to believe otherwise, these were academy girls. And this kingdom was the worst imaginable iteration of a matriarchy.
Luxion scoffed. "Honestly. Just whose child do these girls intend to give birth to?"
"She probably plans to give me an heir right after we get married and then spend the rest of her life doing what she pleases. A lot of women in our kingdom do that. My father's legal wife is the same way."
How could a society permit such behavior, you ask? Sadly, in this world, it just worked like that.
"Considering the relatively small number of men in this world," Luxion mused, "it would make more sense for them to have the stronger bargaining position for marriage. But what I find most peculiar is how terrible the conditions are for barons and viscounts in particular."
True enough. Both commoners and nobles of higher status had it easier than barons and viscounts. Most people of earl rank or higher got to enjoy fairly normal marriages. Granted, there were always exceptions.
"Probably just because this is an otome game, right? There's no need to think too deeply about it. I doubt there's a profound reason underlying any of it."

Maybe it had something to do with the way this fictional world had materialized into reality. Maybe the idiotic intricacies of our marriage system had just so happened to glitch out.
Anyway, I dumped the mountain of letters into the garbage bin.
“Oh?” Luxion said in genuine surprise. “You’re not inviting anyone? Given your personality, I assumed you would bring them all to a grand event where you showered them with snide, hateful remarks.”
“What kind of monster do you take me for? I’m just a nice, ordinary man. I would never do anything like that.”
“I would love to hear your definition of ordinary.”
“Oh, shut up. Enough of that. Clean this up.”
Admittedly, yes, I had considered doing just that, but the thought of having to put on a tea party for a bunch of turncoats was a drag. I was busy, despite what they thought. Specifically, I planned to have tea with Livia—the game’s protagonist, full name Olivia—and Angie—a duke’s daughter, better known as Angelica Rapha Redgrave.
Plus, I had plans with two upperclassmen: Clarice, a second-year, and Deirdre, a third-year. I had a bit of a history with the two by now. I could hardly ignore their tea party requests, especially after they’d gifted me expensive tea leaves and tea sets.
Wait, now that I think about it, all I’ve been doing lately is having tea with girls. I shrugged. Oh well, who’d be mad about that?
I had a more pressing problem. Namely, the woman I suspected of reincarnating here the same way I had—Marie Fou Lafan. Born as the youngest daughter of a poor viscount family, she had recently been officially recognized as the Saint.
If Marie knew anything at all about this game, she would never have stolen the position from Livia. Only Livia’s special power could hope to defeat the final boss—it had nothing to do with her Saint-hood or whatever.
Unfortunately, Marie had ignored that key fact and taken the title anyway. I had to come up with some kind of countermeasure.
“Seriously, why is this happening?”
“Isn’t it your fault, Master?”
You little jerk. Are you still trying to blame me for everything?

***

A lone girl sat on a bench, a dark atmosphere hanging over her. Her long, navy-blue hair was unkempt, her uniform frayed.
Carla Fou Wayne hailed from a baronetcy, specifically a vassal family in the kingdom. Wayne House had served Earl Offrey until the eradication of the earl’s house. The kingdom had sentenced the earl and his heir to death for their involvement with piracy.
Carla had been a member of the Offrey girl’s entourage until the girl abruptly disappeared from the academy. Any house involved with the Offrey

family had since been punished, and almost all those with ties to the late earl had been driven from the academy.
Yet Carla remained. More precisely, she had been left, partially because Wayne House had harbored no direct connection to the pirates.
Unfortunately for poor Carla, there was another reason.
She kept her eyes glued to her feet as other girls walked past.
“What a disgrace. I wish she’d just hurry up and disappear.”
“She definitely consorted with that filth. Why is she even still here?”
The kingdom was making an example of her. They had not given her the option to fade away. She had to accept her circumstances.
However, Carla had never been in a position to refuse the Offrey girl either. Many had known about Offrey House’s shady dealings, but they had also known saying anything was tantamount to suicide. Yet now Offrey House was gone, and Carla was still treated like a traitor.
“What did they expect of me? What could I have done?”
Carla couldn’t have stood against the Offrey House. She would have died. Even if she had tried to make an anonymous report to the capital, one of Earl Offrey’s minions would have found out and put a stop to it, and then the earl would have retaliated.
I was just putting up with that girl like the rest of you. So why am I the outcast? Tears ran down Carla’s cheeks.
Just then, a petite girl approached Carla, a group of people surrounding her. It was Marie, the girl the temple had recognized as the Saint.
She has such a large entourage!
Marie had lacked any such contingent before, but since becoming the Saint, students had flocked to her. Her title drew them in, as did her status as the former crown prince’s lover. To no surprise, countless nobles tripped over themselves to befriend her.
The same girls who had once derided Marie now gushed with praise in her wake.
“Lady Marie, you’re as beautiful as ever today!”
“Your clothing looks lovely again. You have such an eye for fashion.”
“Lady Marie, a new café will open up soon. Would you care to go together?”
The girls at the academy had done a complete about-face, and they had brought with them a number of servants and hopeful male students. Quite the crowd surrounded Marie.
And Marie was living for it. “Come now, everyone, you don’t have to call me ‘Lady Marie.’ Just Marie is fine.”
“Oh goodness, we could never do that!”
Marie flashed a smile. “No, I forbid you. After all, we’re friends, aren’t we?”
“Lady Marie, you are so kindhearted!”
“Aw, you don’t have to flatter me like that.” For as much as she brushed off their compliments, she grinned from ear to ear.
Carla averted her eyes, staring instead at the ground. *If I don’t leave quickly, they’ll bully me again.* She’d once set a trap for two of Marie’s

lovers, Brad and Greg, and she feared retaliation. Thus, she tried to slink away.
But someone noticed. “Oh my, look what we have here,” one of the girls said loudly. “The disgrace to all nobility.”
Carla’s shoulders seized in a panic. She tried to flee, but a couple of boys stepped in front of her and blocked her path.
“So you’re still here.”
“How is someone like you able to call themselves nobility?”
“It really pisses me off.”
Many boys already resented the academy girls; seeing Carla let off easy despite her traitorous ties had made them even more hostile to her specifically.
More people gathered until they completely surrounded Carla. She trembled and sank to her knees, curling in on herself as everyone laughed.
Marie stepped closer with them, hand outstretched. Carla snapped her eyes shut. She steeled herself for a slap. But seconds trickled by and there was nothing. She tentatively lifted her eyes to find Marie smiling, holding a hand toward her.
“Huh? Uh, um…?”
“So you’re Carla. I know a lot has happened, but let’s be friends,” said Marie.

Her words stunned the crowd, and they quickly admonished her.
“Lady Marie, this is the girl who led Lord Brad and Lord Greg into a trap! She’s a traitor! She consorts with criminals!”
Marie shook her head. “She must have had her reasons or she wouldn’t be allowed to stay here. She’s already apologized for her actions, anyway. You shouldn’t gang up on her.”
They all shut their mouths.
Carla put her trembling hand in Marie’s, and Marie helped her up.
Now that Carla stood, the height difference meant Marie had to crane her head to look up at the other girl. Nonetheless, she gently squeezed both of Carla’s hands. “I mean it. Let’s be friends, okay?”
Carla shivered with relief. To her, Marie looked like an angel. She wiped away her tears and nodded. “Y-yeah, okay.”

***

Like hell I’m going to forgive you.
Marie kept the smile plastered on as she stood in front of the crying girl.
I’ll never forgive you for what you did to Brad and Greg—but you also deceived that deplorable background character. That pleases me. And I’m sure it’ll piss him off if you become part of my entourage.
Leon reminded Marie of someone she had known in her previous life—her cruel, sarcastic older brother who always got in her way. She loathed Leon for always bringing back those memories.
Seeing the annoyed look on his face will make forgiving Carla worth it. And look at how benevolent I am for pardoning an awful girl like her!
Marie had stolen the protagonist’s love interests and even taken Kyle, the servant who was supposed to belong to Olivia. Now she had swiped the title of Saint as well. She’d had no other choice, of course, after Leon disrupted her plans.
That stupid background character has given me so much grief. But now it’s my turn to make a move. I’ll be sure to pay him back for everything he’s done.
Marie didn’t know a *ton* about the Saint business, but she knew sainthood made her special—special enough that even if the temple named a commoner the Saint, her new status allowed her to marry the crown prince. Also, as the Saint, she had a few items that only she could use, and each of them greatly amplified her power.
I may have stolen the position from that airhead, Olivia, but as long as I fulfill the role and solve any related problems that crop up, it shouldn’t be too bad. Man, does it feel great to have all these people who looked down on me clamor for my attention now!
Marie enjoyed the change, to say the least.

They mocked me for being below my lovers—they patronized me for being from a poor noble house. But now they're all desperate to ingratiate themselves. And it's time to climb even higher!

Next, she intended to aim for the title of crown princess. Although first she had to get Julius reinstated as the crown prince.

Suddenly, Chris appeared. Chris Fia Arclight, with his blue hair, blue eyes, and glasses, had a dignified air. "Marie, there you are." He smiled as he approached.

Marie, in good spirits, smiled in turn. The girls around her all blushed as they glanced at Chris, which pleased her. "What is it?" she asked.

"A letter arrived for you, so I came to deliver it."

She thanked him and took the envelope. Her eyes went round the moment she saw the signature.

"Marie? Is something wrong?"

"N-no, it's nothing. I-I just remembered I have a little errand to run. I'll be going!"

The others tried to stop her, but Marie sped off. She ran until she found a deserted area and slipped into the shadows to hide. Her fingers trembled as she tore the envelope open.

"J-just calm down. It's going to be okay. I'm the Saint now. No matter what my house tries to do, the boys will protect me."

The letter was from her parents. On scanning it, Marie's legs turned to jelly and she collapsed.

"Why is this happening to meeeeee?!" Marie crumpled the letter in her fists and cried in frustration.

Her parents had used her name as the Saint to borrow a ridiculous sum of money, and they now demanded she repay the loan. Marie had not been blessed with good parents in her second life. Her siblings weren't much better; they were also using the authority of her name to do whatever they pleased.

Her earlier high had now vanished.

"I am so sick of being in debt!" she sobbed. It had been a chain all through her previous life—why did it have to bind her in this one, too?

***

I strolled through the academy's main building with Livia at my side. Her flaxen bob bounced around her chin as she hugged her textbooks to her chest.

"Having to change rooms for every single class is a pain," I grumbled. I wished it were like Japan, where the teachers came to a class that stayed in the same room all day.

Livia's blue eyes glanced over at me, her brows furrowed with concern. "Are you tired, Leon?"

Livia was my light in the darkness of this school, where all the other girls were practically monsters.
“I’m drowning in invitations. Turning them all down is draining,” I confessed.
Livia beamed. “It’s because you’re a hero!”
“Yeah, I’m not the hero type, though.”
“Are there any girls who do draw your interest?” she asked.
“Nope. Hopefully next year some decent ones enter the academy.” I didn’t care for fickle girls who changed their minds as it suited them.
“But if you don’t put on tea parties, your reputation will suffer. Or so I’ve been told.”
“My ‘reputation’?” I laughed. “Who cares if it gets worse? Besides, you and Angie are the only company I need.”
Livia’s cheeks flushed, her lips tugging into a smile. However, it faded quickly. “But you also invited Clarice and Deirdre to one as well, didn’t you?”
Her probing questions prompted me to look away; I tried to play it off with a grin. “You know, I think we better hurry or we’ll be late.”
She sighed and shook her head. “You’re deflecting.”
Our attention was suddenly drawn to a crowd in the corridor. They were all looking at a bulletin board, one covered in a number of notices. You didn’t often see notices attract so many people.
The two of us stepped closer, peering through the crowd. I caught a glimpse of a study abroad poster. Applications were open for a year in the Alzer Republic.
“Study abroad? The academy sure is an incredible place.” Livia sounded intrigued.
But surely that wasn’t what had attracted everyone’s attention—was it?
Just as I gave up and started to retreat down the hall, someone pushed through the cluster of bodies: one of my good friends, Raymond Fou Arkin. His face was heavy with exhaustion.
“What, you’re interested in studying abroad, too?” I asked.
He pushed his glasses up his nose. “Oh, Leon. Wait, what are you talking about?”
I didn’t get the sense he was playing dumb, so I pointed to the poster. “Isn’t that what everyone’s looking at?”
“No. The government’s recruiting bodyguards.”
“Seriously?” Why did people care about *that*? What’s more, if the royal family needed bodyguards, the academy hardly seemed like the appropriate place to do recruitment. “For who?”
Raymond stared at me. “I would think that’s obvious. For the Saint. Although, there are some other special circumstances at play, too.”
“Special? How so?”

“Well, Lady Marie is the Saint, right? And she’s got some pretty important lovers. So the palace has a hand in assigning her bodyguards as well, not just the temple.”
“Ah,” Livia mumbled. “Prince Julius and the others, right?”
Raymond nodded. “Some of the nobles are kicking up a fuss saying this is proof Prince Julius was right to make her his partner. Rumor is they’re trying to reinstate him as crown prince and make Lady Marie the crown princess.”
That stupid otome game had ended with the protagonist becoming the Saint, gaining recognition from the nobles, and marrying whatever love interest she’d selected. Apparently that trajectory was holding for Marie, even though she’d stolen the position.
How annoying.
“Basically, you’re saying anyone who wants to cozy up to her should apply to join her personal guard, right?” I stared at him. “I didn’t have you pegged as the type to be interested in something like that, Raymond.”
He smiled bitterly. “Call it ulterior motives, but I’m eyeing the conditions they’ve offered.”
“Now what are you talking about?”
“The Saint’s bodyguards will be knighted. Not just as knights of the temple but as official knights of the kingdom.”
I scoffed. “There’s no way the temple will agree to that.”
“It’s true—anyone who qualifies to join her personal guard will be knighted. And that’s not all! They’ll grant marital leniency to any guy who makes it—meaning they won’t care about your fiancée’s rank or status.”
I gaped. “Raymond, you mean…”
“That’s right. You’ll be able to take a commoner as your wife.”
Basically, he explained, temple knights had free license to marry whoever they liked because some of them were commoners. The nobility generally mocked any noble who took on the role, but in this case, because you’d also be a knight in the palace’s eyes…it was a free pass to dodge the hell out of the awful pool of prospective noble girls.
Determination burned in the eyes of every man gathered around the bulletin board.
“Damn, I’d volunteer immediately if the person we’d be guarding weren’t a dirtbag,” I grumbled.
“You wouldn’t be able to volunteer anyway, since you’re a regional lord,” said Raymond. “Sadly, I’m in the same boat. Heirs can’t apply.”
“Seriously? I got disappointed over nothing then.”
When I thought about it, it made sense for heirs to be excluded. It sounded like a permanent appointment, which ruled out anyone in a position to succeed their house.
Raymond was similarly discouraged but clearly trying to move on. “So,” he said, “you sure do seem to hate the Saint.”

“Yeah, you couldn’t pay me to voluntarily breathe her air, let alone guard her.”
He sighed, exasperated.
Just then, Livia tugged on my sleeve. “Mr. Leon, look.”
I glanced back to find Angie walking toward us, a grave expression on her face. She glanced up nervously, and my stomach twisted in anxious knots. This couldn’t be good. *Fortunately, my bad premonitions tend to be way off base. I’m sure it’ll be fine.*
“So this is where you were,” she said. “Leon, I just received word from my house.”
Raymond ducked behind me the minute she approached. As a duke’s daughter, Angie’s status far exceeded ours. I couldn’t blame him for feeling uneasy in her presence.
“Word about what?” Livia asked, biting her lip.
Angie offered her a small, reassuring smile.
The two of them were close, which was rather ironic considering that in the game, Angie was the villainess—and Livia’s rival in love. Her brilliant blonde hair was intricately woven into a braid, and her bright red eyes shone with inner strength. She usually had an intimidating air, but with Livia, she softened.
“Don’t worry,” Angie said. “It’s nothing bad.”
For being nothing bad, she sure seemed on edge.
“Okay, so what happened?” I asked.
Angie stared up at me. Those crimson eyes threatened to swallow me whole. Also, it was *really* hard to keep my gaze from wandering down to those voluptuous breasts. Both girls were actually so well endowed I had a hard time completely ignoring their figures like, ever.
“Leon, this is serious.” Angie sensed my mind wandering, and she frowned at me. “It’s not official yet, but…they’ve already decided to appoint you to the Saint’s personal guard.”
“Huh?”

Chapter 1:
The Elf Village

SENIOR OFFICIALS and their assistants gathered in an assembly room within the palace to discuss the matter of the Saint's personal guard. They had a lot of complaining to do, mainly about the temple.
"That lot is getting far too carried away."
"They seriously intend to make us finance her personal guard?"
"Then there's Prince Julius and his friends. Who knows how they'll react if we reject the temple's demands?"
None of them liked that Marie had become the Saint. Of all people who could have possibly taken the title, it had to be the biggest nuisance imaginable. At least, that was the general consensus among the kingdom's officials. Specifically, the temple was using Marie's entanglement with Julius to push his reinstatement. The temple wanted to use him to obtain more power—that much was clear.
Vince, Angie's father, attended the meeting, but his influence these days was minimal. Although he was a duke, his faction had declined after Julius's downfall. He could only watch.
Clarice's father, a plump, mustachioed earl named Bernard Fia Atlee, leaned toward Vince and whispered, "Are you sure about this?"
"Even if I opposed them, it wouldn't overturn their decision. That's quite obvious to me, Minister."
Like Vince, Bernard kept his distance from Marquess Malcom Fou Frampton, the leader of the faction that was their opposition. "Personally, I owe that boy, so I'm loath to do this to him," Bernard said, "but it's also true no one is more suited to the role. I have no choice but to go along with the decision."
"He's neither my vassal nor my foster child," Vince assured him. "You needn't act apologetic toward me."
Just then, Marquess Frampton spoke, and everyone went quiet. He was tall and slender, with deep wrinkles chiseled into his face. He had a prominent nose, and his beard cascaded down his chest. While his cheeks were sunken, his eyes bulged dramatically.
The man looks so pale. He must really be pushing himself. No matter how the marquess tried to hide his fatigue with face powder, Vince wasn't fooled.
"You have all made your opinions readily apparent. Now that we have come to an agreement, does anyone oppose the decision?" Marquess Frampton scanned the faces of those present, but not a single person raised their voice in protest, Vince included.

What a farce. Vince knew the marquess's faction had already met and decided on the matter before they called an assembly. Frampton was only confirming his victory.
"I am sure Redgrave House has something it would like to add, but this is for the sake of our kingdom," said the marquess. "I hope you understand."
"I never said I disagreed," Vince replied.
A young noble from Marquess Frampton's faction stood. "In that case, Viscount Leon Fou Bartfort will be appointed as head of the Saint's personal guard."
A number of nobles expressed their displeasure, but it was all directed at Leon specifically.
"I can't believe that upstart will be in the Saint's personal guard."
"As long as he can serve as an alarm should any trouble arise, that's good enough."
"The problem is his collection of Lost Items. Shouldn't we confiscate them *before* he changes sides and aligns himself with the temple?"
"But he earned them himself while adventuring, right? Taking them would violate national policy."
"Hmph, he should just offer them to us freely."
"Are we really okay leaving them in his care?"
Their anxiety about Leon really stemmed from wariness of Marie. In a short span of time, she had managed to beguile a number of prominent high lords, one after the other. For all they knew, Leon was next. If that happened, he might align himself with the temple over the kingdom.
The young noble supporting the marquess addressed the assembly's unease with confidence. "I understand how you all feel. However, the viscount has beaten Prince Julius and his companions in a duel not once but twice, and his cruelty in doing so rendered the crowd silent. Given the bad blood between them, I don't think we have to worry about him bending to the Saint."
One of the officials chuckled. "For as much as she loves devouring men, it seems like even the Saint isn't fond of the upstart."
A few other court nobles snickered to themselves.
Marquess Frampton raised his hand, drawing everyone's attention. "I sympathize with the unease regarding Viscount Bartfort. Why don't we consider this a test to see whether the boy is fit to keep those Lost Items of his?"
Vince frowned. "What are we, vultures who would steal someone's rightful treasure? Marquess Frampton, I cannot abide it."
"Duke Redgrave—no, Vince—I only mean to suggest we ensure he's fit to wield such powerful items. I haven't said anything about taking them away. That all depends on the quality of his character."
The other nobles nodded in agreement, whispering among themselves.
"True, it could be dangerous to leave things the way they are."

“As long as we don’t take anything from him, I don’t see anything wrong with it.”
“Yes. But I do think it’s too dangerous to leave those items in the hands of an upstart.”
“There’s no guarantee he won’t start hoarding power.”
Again, Marquess Frampton’s faction held sway when it came to the majority opinion.
“So, no complaints then, Vince? Or do you intend to monopolize the power of those Lost Items for yourself? Your daughter certainly does seem close with Viscount Bartfort.” The marquess punctuated his statement with a glare.
So they planned to take away his Lost Items from the very beginning. Vince inclined his head. “Do as you like.”
“What a relief. I am glad you’re being so reasonable.”
With that, Vince sank into quiet contemplation. It was time to consider his next maneuver.

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I stood on the *Partner*’s deck, staring at Marie and her group of followers.
“This blows.”
Luxion floated beside me. “Her ability to derive such joy out of life must be some kind of talent. That aside, why did we have to pull out the *Partner* for her?”
The *Partner* was a smaller replica of the spaceship that comprised Luxion’s main body. We portrayed this ship as the genuine Lost Item while keeping the real deal hidden. But since Luxion had created the *Partner*, he fussed over it as if it were his child.
Marie had suggested she and her entourage go on an adventure together, which meant she needed an airship to travel on. And of course, the first person she came to was me.
“No one else would lend her their ship, so I had no other choice. This is the worst. Having to follow her orders makes my skin crawl.”
She reminded me so much of my little sister from my last life. She’d been a real piece of work, though my sisters in this world were no less unpleasant.
“It’s hard to believe you’re the leader of Marie’s personal guard,” Luxion mused.
“Don’t say it! I’m having enough trouble accepting it as is.”
What in the world were the other nobles thinking? What had led them to assign me to her personal guard? Were they morons?
Marie was in high spirits, chortling as her minions fawned over her. Curiously, Carla was hanging around her as well, but someone else piqued my interest more: Marie’s personal servant, Kyle.
He had short blond hair and long, narrow ears, and he looked young enough to be in junior high. He had a cocky way of talking, but he seemed pretty

laid-back for his age. He hung back from the crowd, grasping the railing as he gazed up at the sky.
I approached him. “What’s wrong? Your mistress’s followers steal her away from you?”
He glanced back at me. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t talk to me. I hate you, in case you weren’t aware.”
The way he said it so bluntly pissed me off. I wasn’t exactly a tolerant person. “Great! If you hate me so much, why don’t I toss you overboard so you never have to look at me again?”
Since we were drifting through the sky, I wouldn’t be chucking him into water but into open air.
Kyle snorted. “How would that benefit you? People like you don’t make a move without weighing the pros and cons first.”
He was absolutely right, and that just infuriated me more. Okay, I didn’t *actually* intend to throw him overboard. But if I’d thought he was a cocky brat in the game, it turned out he was even more insufferable in person.
“Tch, I won’t forget this.” I stomped off.
“Wow,” the little turd called after me, “you sound like a thug running off with his tail tucked between his legs.”
Before the blood could rush to my head, Luxion interjected, “Master, Olivia and Angelica are coming this way.”
Livia was smiling cheerfully while Angie fidgeted with anticipation.
“Leon, we can already see our destination from here!” Livia smiled. Her excitement stemmed from historical interest—she just wanted to see the ruins.
Angie, on the other hand, was showing her true colors as the descendant of adventurers. The words *trip* and *ruins* had set her off fantasizing about treasure. She could barely contain her anxiety. “We need to land quickly, set up camp close to the ruins, and then find the treasure before the rest of them!”
I tilted my head. “Angie, aren’t you’re already rich enough?”
“True, but there is still merit in *finding* it. I didn’t sleep at all last night.”
She was normally so mature. It was rare to see her express such childlike enthusiasm over something.
“Me neither!” said Livia, “I can’t wait to search these ruins. I’ve always wondered how ancient people lived.” She brimmed with curiosity.
Their enthusiasm was the one saving grace of this trip. Honestly, if Angie and Livia hadn’t wanted to come along, I would have rejected Marie’s request.
“As long as you two are enjoying yourselves, I’m glad I brought the *Partner*, then.”
“I’m grateful,” said Angie. “There’s the dungeon in the capital, but it’s not a true adventure if you don’t explore the unknown.”
As I chatted with them, Marie wandered over, her head high as a haughty princess’s. She pressed a hand over her hair to keep the wind from

whipping through it. “Hey, you, the island came into view, so you need to make preparations to dock. I want to collect this treasure as quickly as possible.”
I growled, pinning her with a glare.
Marie shrank back and averted her gaze. The way she acted like a small, startled animal reminded me of my previous little sister, too.
Pisses me off.
“Uh, um, I mean… It would be really great if we could make preparations to land, so…” She sure got timid without her lackeys. They all kept their distance from Angie.
Angie stared at Marie with unrestrained anger. “The *Partner* belongs to Leon. Do you have complaints about how he runs things?” She took a step forward.
Marie scrambled back, though she hardly needed to—Jilk Fia Marmoria and Greg Fou Seberg appeared just then. The other three love interests were apparently busy.
Jilk stepped in between Angie and Marie. He had long, green hair, and despite his serene demeanor, he was a conniving weasel. As Prince Julius’s foster brother, he was head of the prince’s own personal guard. Or rather… he *had* been. Julius had taken Jilk with him when he fell from power, and the guy was pretty firmly still disowned.
“Miss Angelica, might I ask what you intended to do to Miss Marie?” he asked.
“Nothing. I was simply warning her.” Angie backed down, which was a huge relief for me.
“Don’t complain,” I said to Marie. “I’ll land the ship and get things ready.”
“F-fine…” Marie agreed. Her face made clear she was still dissatisfied.
I hated that I could read her so easily.
Our little commotion had caught the attention of another guest on my ship. A slender girl with long black hair, pale skin, and red eyes glided over the deck toward us—Princess Hertrude Sera Fanoss. The kingdom’s officials had more or less forced the principality’s princess to study abroad at our academy.
“Oh, there you all are,” she said. “I was looking for you.”
Angie wrinkled her nose and mumbled, “I didn’t know she would be coming with us.”
Luxion floated closer and whispered, “She’s been searching the ship this whole time.”
“I really do have to wonder what the officials are thinking, forcing a foreign princess on me, too.” I sighed.
Miss Hertrude smiled at us, but it would have been a stretch to call her friendly. Part of that was my fault. After defeating the Fanoss army during our school trip, I had taunted them, saying things like, *Tell me, how does it feel? Losing to a bunch of kids, I mean. Come on, I’m curious.* Plus, I’d taken the princess prisoner. That probably didn’t help.

Which is to say, the way she subsequently beamed directly at me sent chills down my spine. “Viscount Bartfort, your airship is so enormous that I got lost within it.”
“Ah, sorry to hear that. Where are your escorts? Please don’t wander around by yourself.”
“We got separated.” The princess shrugged. “You can hardly blame me for that.”
A few academy students had been assigned to watch her, but they were nowhere to be seen. She had either shaken them off or thrown them overboard.
Luxion cut in with another whisper: “They purposefully left her alone, actually.”
Huh. I scrutinized her. This schemer didn’t know when to accept defeat; I could feel it. *What’s she planning?*
The princess turned away. “I’d thank you not to look at me with those lecherous eyes.”
Way to misinterpret me. I wasn’t interested, thanks. Her chest was flat enough to give Marie a run for her money. I shook my head. “Sorry.”
“Wh-why are you looking at me with such pity? What’s that about?” Her cheeks flushed.
Angie stepped forward. “Enough of that for now. We need to get ready to land.”
The *Partner* had arrived at the island where the elves lived. Their harbor wasn’t large enough to accommodate our ship, so we docked elsewhere as Luxion began our preparations to disembark.

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Once we touched down, the girls on board began distributing orders and the boys hauled the girls’ luggage.
“Hey, you, don’t mishandle my things!”
“I-I’m sorry…”
Most of the girls had servants who technically should have done the work, but the servants were also the girls’ lovers. The boys knew it would only cause them grief if they tried to order the servants around, so they kept their heads down and did as they were told.
Meanwhile, I had a headache of my own to deal with.
“Commander, do you want me to carry this luggage?” Greg asked. He’d been acting more familiar with me, almost as if we were friends.
“Don’t call me that. I still haven’t accepted this.”
“Hey, if you’re leading her personal guard, that makes you our commander, too, at least in my book.” He grinned. “I’m looking forward to working with you, Commander.”
This was awful.

Miss Hertrude watched our exchange from nearby, flanked by the students that had been assigned to accompany her. “The kingdom is a cruel place indeed,” she remarked.
I assumed she was referring to the discrepant gender dynamics. “Is it different in the principality?” I asked.
“Ha, as if my country would do anything this crude.”
If that was true, I was almost tempted to defect from Holfort Kingdom and to the Principality of Fanoss. Not that I actually could.
“But the principality used to be part of the kingdom, right? How come it’s so different?”
It had won its independence in battle. Ongoing hostilities between the two nations had led to our current predicament.
“I merely sympathize with the kingdom’s people,” Miss Hertrude said. “Especially you, Viscount Bartfort. You have it rough. Whatever woman you marry will surely parade her demi-human lover in public. We don’t permit such vulgarity in the principality. If you’re willing to switch sides, I promise we’ll give you treatment worthy of a hero.”
Do you know how many other people are watching? Don’t bring that up here! You’ll make me question my loyalties.
Greg, for one, was obviously listening in on the conversation, eyes narrowed in anger.
Just then, Marie approached. “Hey, what happened to searching for treasure? I want to hurry up and get moving.”
The princess rolled her eyes. “You’re the Saint, aren’t you? How odd for you to be so fixated on money.”
It was like she’d stepped on a land mine.
“What would you know?!” Marie spat. “My family dug themselves into debt without any regard for me!”
While I did honestly hate Marie, I at least felt sorry for her in one regard: her family really did seem to be the worst. I’d heard about how they racked up all that debt in her name. What lowlifes. I almost pitied her. Almost.
Greg tried to reassure her. “Don’t worry, Marie. Julius and the others are working hard to help pay off your family’s loans.”
That solved the riddle of where three-fifths of the idiot brigade had gone.
A shadow hung over Marie’s face. “Life is rough when you don’t have money… Whatever you need, you can’t afford. Even if your shoes are full of holes, you can’t get new ones. I’ve cut down my living expenses as much as possible, and it’s still not enough. I don’t even know what’s left.”
Wait, is she actually cursed?
“Leave it at that, okay?” I said. “Even Miss Hertrude’s getting awkward.”
The princess had muttered an apology around the point Marie started going off about shoe holes.
I glanced around at the bustle of everyone disembarking. “We should visit the locals and talk to them before we head into the ruins. The only problem is finding the elves’ village…”

We knew nothing about this island's geography.
Kyle's hand shot up. "I can lead you there. I was born here."

***

We decided to proceed through the forest with Kyle in the lead.
Marie, oblivious as always, seemed genuinely surprised by this turn of events. "Aw, come on, Kyle. You should have told me this was your hometown. We could have prepared some gifts for everyone."
She probably planned to act as if she was just accompanying him on a friendly visit back home. But from Kyle's perspective, this had to be pretty awkward; he'd been sold as a slave and was returning with his mistress. Was he seriously going to introduce her and say, *Hey, guys, this is the girl that bought me!*
I snorted. Yeah, I wouldn't want that if it were me. How the heck did she not know this was his home?
"There's no need for gifts." Kyle walked on ahead with the same expression I'd seen when he was by himself on the *Partner*'s deck. He didn't look the least bit happy to be here. In fact, he looked depressed.
Unlike Marie, who was all too insensitive, Livia had picked up on Kyle's mood. "Leon," she asked, "don't you think there's something off about him? He's finally getting to go home. Why does he seem so dejected?"
I shrugged. "Maybe he has some reason for not wanting to come back."
As for Angie's attitude…
"So this is the forest where the elves live, hmm? I never knew there was a dungeon here. I can't wait to see it!"
She was overflowing with anticipation.
Meanwhile, Marie was already fantasizing about the success of her upcoming adventure. "Everything will be fine. If we can rake in the cash here, I can erase all the debt. Maybe there will even be something left over. I could eat at one of those popular food stalls. Maybe even get dessert with my dinner! Oh, I also need to buy new clothes. The stuff I have now is falling apart at the seams."
It was depressing just listening to her. Why was she so pitiful? Surely the temple had given her the finances to cover her daily expenses as soon as she was proclaimed the Saint. Her parents must have accrued that monstrous debt before she could even enjoy it. What kind of awful sin had she committed in her previous life to deserve such punishment?
We walked on along a single stretch of well-maintained road leading through the forest, with our little group in the front and Jilk and Greg bringing up the rear. Everyone else was in between. Mixed among them was Miss Hertrude, who shuffled along with an annoyed look on her face. I dropped back to talk to her.
"You could have waited on the ship," I said.

“It was my choice. Besides, after coming this far, it would be a shame not to see the ruins for myself.”
Those idiots at the top who decided to let her have free rein should have their brains checked. Shouldn’t they be a little more cautious?
Luxion floated by my shoulder, scrutinizing the road with his single, red eye. “Master, what are these ‘elves’?”
“You know, a fantasy race. Why, has something caught your interest?”
“Per my data, there is no such thing as a race of elves. That means they must have suddenly appeared while I was on standby for all those years. Doesn’t that make *you* curious?”
I hadn’t really thought about it too deeply, so no.
“I find it even more curious that they can’t crossbreed with humans, and yet men…”
I tuned him out as a village came into view.
Kyle pointed ahead. “There, that’s where I was born.”
Marie hopped, giddy with delight. “Oooh! There are beauties everywhere!”
At a glance, it was a tranquil yet well-provisioned settlement. Most of the buildings were made out of wood, giving the place a sense of unity. Yet all the villagers were absolutely gorgeous, their toned figures bedecked in skintight clothing.
Jilk put a hand on his chin, a sure sign he was about to show off some knowledge. “Most humans consider all elves to be beautiful, but they actually have a different sense of aesthetics than we do.”
Marie and Greg looked equally shocked. “What, really?”
Yeah, I didn’t figure you’d know about that. Not that I did either.
“Quite. Their sense of aesthetics is based on how much mana a person possesses, so they have no real interest in individual appearance.”
While everyone else expressed fascination with this revelation, Kyle made no move to participate in the conversation. A shame; as an elf, he had to be more knowledgeable than Jilk on this stuff.
“You’ve been acting weird for a bit now,” I said to him. “What’s up?”
“Please don’t talk to me. Don’t try to be nice just to make yourself feel better. And don’t delude yourself into thinking I want your help just because I’m feeling down. I hate jerks like you.”
My face heated up again. “And I hate snot-nosed brats like you. I hope it’s awkward as hell when you introduce your stupid mistress to your mommy.”
Kyle sighed. “You don’t get it at all, do you? Listen, because I’m only going to explain this once. Becoming a slave is nothing more than a job to elves. The word may have negative connotations to you, but slaves here are treated really well. Certainly much better than you academy boys.”
He wasn’t wrong, but it still pissed me off to hear him say it.
“I see,” Luxion mumbled. “So the elves consider it nothing more than a job. That makes sense.”

Oblivious to our side conversation, Jilk continued his lecture. “They say elves live much longer lives than humans. A dozen years or so is nothing to them.”
So being a servant to a rich woman was just a long-term job, huh? But what Kyle said bothered me. I wondered if other slaves—servants, whatever you called them—felt the same. The word *slave* did have a negative connotation for humans, but all the servants at the academy were treated well by their masters, as far as I knew. In fact, the male students even envied them.
One of the elves noticed us approaching and hurried over in our direction. It was a woman with green hair, golden eyes, and an adorable face. Judging by her petite frame, I assumed she was around the same age as us. My eyes were instantly drawn to her enormous chest.
What? I’m a growing boy.
“Kyle!” She waved as she dashed toward us.
I guess they must know each other.
Kyle’s posture turned rigid as she approached. He stepped closer to Marie, who was busy chatting with Jilk. “Lady Marie,” he said, interrupting them, “this woman is my mother. Her name is Yumeria.”
Wait, what? His mother?!
Elves always looked significantly younger than their real age. Holy crap—was Kyle way older than his appearance suggested? That made us comrades, if so.
“Huh? Oh! Um, yes, nice to meet you!” Marie stammered out a greeting.
Miss Yumeria was similarly flustered and bowed her head. Marie returned the gesture, and their nigh comical politeness softened the nervous atmosphere.
Kyle, however, was matter-of-fact. “The people with me would like to enter our village’s ruins. We’re seeking the village leader’s permission first, of course, so we came here to pay our respects. If you’ll excuse us…”
“Um,” said Miss Yumeria, “it’s been a long time since you’ve returned home, Kyle. You don’t have to treat me like such a stranger—”
“I don’t have time to reminisce. I’m working.” Perhaps that was the proper attitude for Kyle to take as a servant, but it was still awfully cold.
Miss Yumeria’s face fell.
“Come on, don’t be so aloof with your mom,” I scolded him. “This is your first time back in a while, right?”
Kyle sneered at me, even more spiteful than usual. “Don’t act like we’re close. I’m Lady Marie’s personal servant, and I have no intention of being friendly with you.”
Greg’s nostrils flared. “Hey, you’re going too far. Bartfort is our commander!”
Even Marie seemed to find her servant’s behavior a bit bizarre. “Kyle, don’t get into a fight. You’re acting really weird today.”
“I’m the same as always. Come on, the leader’s house is this way.” He started forward without giving his mother a second glance.

Concerned, Livia turned to Miss Yumeria and said, “Um, Kyle’s been acting a bit strange ever since we came to the island. That is, uh, I think maybe he’s just not in a good mood.”
Miss Yumeria smiled sadly. “It’s all right. I’m the one in the wrong. The one who’s so ugly and impure.”
That word—*impure*—weighed on my mind.

***

The village leader’s manor was enormous. About a dozen years ago, he’d finished working as someone’s personal servant—slave, I guess?—and returned to the village with enough of a fortune to build his estate. Honestly, he still looked like a young guy in his twenties who just happened to have a beard.
“You want to visit our ruins?” he asked.
Everyone else was standing by in the parlor, so I was essentially the representative of our group. “Yes. May we have your permission?”
“I’m afraid our community considers that a holy site, so it would be difficult to grant you entry. I can’t imagine the other village leaders would agree to it.”
Several villages lay across the island, and together they were a community.
“Besides,” he continued, “our head elder is a stubborn one. I’m sure she’d be opposed to letting outsiders in.”
“Head elder?”
“An old woman who was once skilled in the art of fortune-telling. I’ve heard she used to entertain many visitors who were interested in her skills, but her power has waned over time. Most of her predictions turn out to be false now.”
I couldn’t care less about the fortune-telling nonsense, but it was going to be an issue if they wouldn’t let us into their ruins.
“I know it must be disappointing,” the leader said, “but I’m afraid you’ll have to give up. Even we don’t normally enter the ruins, and there’s no treasure to be found in there. Searching would be pointless.”
“Huh?” I stared at him.
“Elves are allowed to enter freely, and many have gone in. We’ve already searched every nook and cranny of the place. You won’t find the treasure you seek in there.”
Are things different here than they were in the game?
As I contemplated this, someone banged on the door. A female elf burst in.
“The head elder is—”
Before she could finish, the villager leader snatched up the closest thing he could find and flung it at her. It struck her, and she collapsed to the floor with a shriek.
I gaped at the leader, appalled.

He ignored me and began berating the girl. “You have some nerve, running through the halls and barging through my door! How many times must I teach you before it sinks in? You know this behavior is unseemly in front of guests!” He marched over to her and kicked her where she lay.
I was so shocked that it took me a moment to scramble over and stop him. “What in the world are you doing?!” I demanded.
He shook my hand off and scowled at me. It was the same look servants gave male academy students. “I would appreciate it if you stayed out of my way. Etiquette is of paramount importance to us. If we don’t stay on our toes, we risk teaching our children improper habits. That will only reduce their value in the slave market.”
Obviously they had their own circumstances, which were far beyond my comprehension, but it still seemed cruel. I couldn’t just stand by and watch. “Well, it’s not a pleasant sight for your guests.” It was the best defense I could muster.
“My apologies. Now, what did you come here for?” He turned back to the girl.
Tears streamed down her face, but she managed to blubber out her report. The head elder was paying a visit to the village today.

***

Elves gathered in the village plaza, all of them gorgeous. In the middle of them stood a short, elderly white-haired woman with a cane; an assistant supported her. Her back was hunched and her face so shriveled you couldn’t tell whether her eyes were open or closed. Both she and her assistant wore unique clothing compared to everyone else. The elder leaned toward her assistant, whispering into her ear. After a moment, the younger woman spoke.
“I’ll be conveying the head elder’s words to you. She said no one is to enter the ruins ever again. If they do, they risk angering the ancient demon king.”
The village leader looked exasperated. But the old woman outranked him, so he spoke more politely than he had with the girl he’d terrorized moments before. “You know we already have villagers who enter those ruins. Who is this demon king?”
Again, the elder muttered to her younger companion. The assistant relayed, “She says, ‘Do you think I know nothing? I know what you’ve been up to. You mustn’t meddle with the taboo. No one is to enter the holy grounds.’”
The other elves expressed annoyance, but both the elder and her assistant seemed entirely serious.
Even Luxion, floating by my shoulder, seemed unimpressed. “Fortune-telling?”
“What? Are you a skeptic?”
“Not at all. I know some people possess strange powers. You are one such person, Master.”

True, from his perspective, I did defy science by retaining memories from my previous life. That aside, there was a curious inconsistency in the village leader's claims. He said elves were free to enter the ruins, but the head elder acted as though no one was supposed to approach it. And also…
"Do you know anything about this demon king she mentioned?" I asked Luxion.
"You would be more knowledgeable about that than me, Master. Did a demon king ever appear in the otome game you played?"
"Nah, nothing like that ever showed up. That's why I'm intrigued."
Had the head elder gone senile? Judging by the way everyone treated her, it was less like her fortune-telling abilities had dwindled and more like no one trusted her—as if they were mocking her.
Just then, Marie pushed through the crowd of elves toward the head elder.
"Move aside! Your babbling is getting on my last nerve. I demand you guide me to those ruins at once! I have treasure hunting to do!"
Rude, yes, but those debts had made her desperate.
When the head elder spotted Marie, her eyes widened. She began whispering to her assistant, whose jaw dropped. She blurted, "Miss, are you the Saint?"
"Oh, you could tell? That's right. I am the Saint. Now that you understand, hurry up and—"
Before she could finish, the assistant cut her off. "The head elder doesn't mind if you enter. She said the Saint would bring the ancient demon king with her. She's foretold this day for several months."
Murmurs broke out among the elves, and Marie tilted her head to the side.
"Demon king? Uh, but I don't know anyone who fits that description…"
Well, you're basically the final boss as far as I'm concerned. That's close enough to a demon king—or queen, rather.
Regardless, this was a good indication that the elder's abilities weren't half as good as they (supposedly) used to be. The true Saint wasn't Marie. It was Livia. The whole demon king business had to be a misunderstanding, too.
I glanced at Luxion.
He promptly offered his analysis. "Perhaps she's referring to Julius? He *is* part of the royal family, and as the descendant of new humans, he does possess magic. That could be considered demonic. By those definitions, I could arguably call him a demon king."
"Your explanation almost sounds convincing except for one problem—Julius isn't here."
"Yes, well, that's not my fault. If we're acting on the premise that her fortune-telling is accurate, then it is a possibility. That's all I'm saying."
Yeah, well, Julius made for a pretty pathetic demon king if even I could beat him up.
The elder's assistant cast her gaze around the crowd and proclaimed, "The time of reckoning is at hand. Will our island be destroyed? Or will we be forgiven? You are all forbidden from hindering the Saint and her party. The

head elder says you must all wait quietly for the demon king to pass judgment!”
Once she had said her piece, the elder departed.
I stared after her and leaned toward Luxion. “Does that mean we have permission to enter the ruins?”
“How convenient. Now we don’t have to force our way in or infiltrate the site in secret.”
“Wait, you seriously planned to do something that outrageous?”
“Yes,” said Luxion. “Do you have a problem?”

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Having received permission, we entered the ruins. Sadly, everyone was dispirited the moment they saw the inside.
“There’s nothing here,” I said, stating the obvious.
There were rooms at least, and roots and ivy covered the walls and floors. It looked like an abandoned modern building to my eyes, but Livia saw it as the breathtaking remnants of an ancient civilization. She was the only delighted one.
“Amazing! Leon, take a look at this. The shape of this object is the same as what we discovered in other ruins. There’s another with a slightly different shape over here by the door. These objects are unique to ancient ruins!”
“Uh, yeah, fascinating.”
Right, so it was a card reader. You know, for scanning key cards. But they were so busted that they no longer functioned.
Luxion turned to me. “I assume I shouldn’t reveal the truth to her?”
Livia was entertaining herself by theorizing about how the ancients had used these devices. It seemed Luxion didn’t want to ruin the mystery for her.
“Nah, I’m sure she’d still be happy if you told her,” I said.
“Sometimes it’s more interesting if you discover the answer for yourself. Not that you would know, I’m sure.”
I glared at him. “You really do have a rotten personality.”
“Not half as rotten as yours, I assure you.”
“There’s no treasure?” Angie’s shoulders slumped. “I mean, I guess it will be interesting enough to tell everyone how I saw ruins like these in person, but…is there really no treasure?”
Not only was there no treasure, the whole place had been thoroughly cleaned out.
“I had my hopes up when I heard they were elven ruins,” Jilk said dejectedly, “but there’s really nothing here.”
Greg had already shrugged it off. “Come on, it’s not that easy to find old ruins still packed with treasure. It wouldn’t be any fun if you didn’t strike out occasionally. In fact, it’s almost kinda refreshin’ how empty this place is.”

Surprisingly, Miss Hertrude was also discouraged.
“What? Don’t tell me you wanted treasure, too?” I teased her.
“I did, in fact. Something wrong with that?”
I hadn’t expected such an honest answer. “No, nothing wrong with it. I’m just surprised.”
“The principality was once part of Holfort Kingdom. We share the same affinity for adventuring.”
Why did marriage work so differently between our countries then? “So you were hoping for an adventure, too?”
“Despite what you may think of me, I am a member of the royal family. I rarely get opportunities like this.” The way she averted her eyes with her cheeks flushed was adorable—and it served as a reminder that she was still just a young schoolgirl.
Aww, she’s actually pretty cute. I grinned. “You should have just said that, then.”
“Absolutely not,” she huffed and promptly walked away.
I turned my attention to the most depressed of our party—Marie. Even I hated to see her so devastated.
“No, no, no! This wasn’t how it was supposed to be!” she wailed.
“It’s okay,” Jilk assured her, “we’ll find another ruin. Next time let’s make it an even bigger adventure and go with the prince and everyone else. Okay?”
The two of them were not at all on the same wavelength. Marie wasn’t disappointed at the lack of adventure; she wanted treasure. Her expression soured as she glanced at him. “Y-yeah, I guess.”
Angie, leaving Livia to her captivation, wandered over toward me. “What are we going to do now, Leon? Pick up and take off? The village leader looks annoyed about this whole thing.”
I followed her gaze. The man hovered at the entrance to the building, keeping tabs on us. His eyes were especially cold when they turned on me.
“He’s looking down on me,” I said. “Bastard really pisses me off.”
I wanted to take a fist to his face and send him flying. Ancient or not, I couldn’t wait for this “demon king” or whatever to bring his hammer down on that village leader. Not that any such thing actually existed.
“Is this enough to satisfy you?” the village leader called. “There’s nothing to see here.”
My memories of the game had faded over time, but something kept me here. I could have sworn…
“No, we can’t give up like this!” Marie blurted. “While I’m wasting time, my debt’s only growing! I-I refuse to give up! I don’t want to spend my life paying off loans!”
Her emotions got the best of her, and Marie took off, speeding deeper into the ruins.
Angie’s face flushed with anger. “I can’t believe her, running off by herself! All she does is cause trouble for others!”

I grabbed the rifle I'd brought and started after Marie. "Come on, Luxion. Angie, you and the others wait here. I'll bring her back."
"You sure do have it rough, guarding her," said Angie.
"No kidding. I wish she'd give me a break, I'm just a student."
Livia was concerned. "Don't push yourself too much, Leon. Uh, um…"
Was she worried I might do something to Marie? If so, she was absolutely right to.
Jilk and Greg tried to follow, but I ordered them to stay and started off after my idiot charge.
Frankly, my chance had come. Now I could finally corner Marie, and the two of us could talk one on one. We had a lot in common, after all, as fellow reincarnated background characters.

***

It was dark in the depths of the ruins.
Marie left her lantern behind and started searching along the floor.
"No, it's not here! I don't see the entrance to the underground anywhere!"
The bright light from Luxion's red eye illuminated her. She jumped in surprise, peering over her shoulder at us, and scrambled away until her back pressed against the wall like a cornered rat.
I aimed my rifle at her. "So I've finally got you alone. I kept looking for an opportunity on the ship, but I never got my chance. Now we can take our time and chat."
She trembled violently, reaching for her handgun.
"Don't move. If you do, I'll shoot," I said.
"You'll be in so much trouble if you kill me! I'm the Saint!"
I snorted. "You're a fake. A thief. No, you're going to give me answers, and detailed ones—but where to start? How about this: What are you planning to do from here on out?"
She scowled. "Huh? What are you talking about? If you want to ask me something, don't beat around the bush."
Still shameless in spite of her circumstances. I really would have loved to shoot her. *No one would get mad if I took just one shot, right?*
"Okay." I drew in a breath. "I'll make it simple and ask one question at a time, so make sure you answer. Did you reincarnate here?"
"If you're asking if I still have memories of my previous life…I do. You seem to be the same."
"Then you know that this world is based on *that* otome game, right?"
"And what of it?" She wasn't denying anything. Obviously she knew what this place was, then.
"Then why did you take Livia's place? If war breaks out between the kingdom and the principality—"
Marie laughed. "Are you stupid? You really think I can't do the same exact things she can? I can use healing magic, too, you know. I am perfectly

qualified to be the Saint. Besides, both the temple and the holy items acknowledged me."
That was the baffling part. The temple was one thing, but I'd never dreamed the items would actually recognize her as the Saint.
"I could out you as a fraud," I said.
"Be my guest. It won't do you any good. At the end of the day, I'll still be the Saint. Too bad for you."
True, no one was likely to listen no matter how much I protested. *She really pisses me off.*
Luxion chimed in, "There seem to be some discrepancies here, Master. Perhaps it would be best for the two of you to share information?"
Marie drew her brows together, confused. "What? What are you getting at? Just so you know, I watched all the scenes—"
Before she could finish, tremors rippled through the ground.
"Ah?!"
And the floor crumbled beneath us.
"Auuugh!"

***

Angie stood at the entrance to the ruins, Jilk and Greg pacing nearby.
"Calm down," she told them. "Leave it to Leon. Everything will be fine."
Deep down, she wasn't especially pleased about Leon showing concern for Marie. He seemed hung up on her the entire time we were on the ship, too. Don't tell me he…?
Jilk shot her a glare. "That's exactly what worries me. The two of them, alone together. Can you say for certain that our fears are unfounded?"
Greg glanced in the direction Marie and Leon had gone. "Don't you think they're late getting back? Let's go get 'em. I'm kinda worried Bartfort might get some crazy ideas or something. He's not exactly used to being around women, and Marie is so cute…"
The suggestion that Leon might have some *interest* in Marie made Angie lose all composure. "D-don't be ridiculous! Leon's not like you two!"
"What part of him is any different?" Jilk shook his head. "We're all men, and Marie is an amazing woman. There's no guarantee nothing will happen between them."
"And this is exactly the kind of situation where a guy makes a move," said Greg. "Wait, no, maybe he was aiming for this the whole time?!"
Angie was almost hysterical. "Don't act like Leon is the same as you!"
"Please, that's the last thing I want!" Jilk scowled at her. "But it *is* true that Viscount Bartfort tried to approach Marie while we were on the ship. I was beside her the whole time as her bodyguard, so I would know!"
Angie's cheeks flushed. "Leon hates Marie. Both of you know that! Livia, please say something. You know he would never put his hands on her, right?"

In contrast to Angie's emotional outburst, Livia was quiet. Moreover, her face had grown deathly pale. "Um, I just realized this, but…why did Leon have a rifle with him, of all things? These ruins are perfectly safe. There's no monsters here, so he didn't need a weapon, did he?"
Angie, Jilk, and Greg all stared at her, their eyes wide. Leon normally kept his distance from Marie, but for some reason, he'd been trying to approach her on this trip. He'd taken his rifle with him to search for her even though there was no need for it, and he'd refused to let anyone go along with him.
The three of them blanched.
Jilk and Greg scrambled out of the room, Angie and Livia giving chase.
"Miss Marie!"
"Marie!"
"W-wait! I know Leon can be cruel, but even he wouldn't do something like that!" Angie shouted.
"That's right," Livia agreed. "The most he would do is threaten her!"
With the four of them gone, only a few others remained at the entrance: Hertrude, Kyle, and the village leader.

***

Marie was unconscious, dreaming something nostalgic from her past life. It must have been summer, because it was humid. The sun's rays were blinding. When night fell, the sky was dyed orange. The sight, while heartwarming, made her wistful. She remembered how hot it had been that day.
Yeah, that's right. I forgot about that.
A little girl bawled after she'd tripped and skinned her knee. "Bubby, carry me!" she pleaded to her big brother.
The thought of him irked Marie, but for some reason, she couldn't remember his face. Even though both he and her younger self were standing there in front of her, their faces were blurry.
"It's not that bad," he said. "You can walk by yourself. You'd make my back all sweaty if I carried you. Plus, you're heavy."
I'm not heavy! I'm super small and dainty, you jerk!
She had consciously used that to her advantage in her former life, too, which was why she was so taken aback at her brother's brusque refusal. In fact, she was so surprised she stopped crying all together. "Eh?"
"See, you were only pretending to cry. I hate it when you put on a show like that. You're not fooling me."
The narrow street was relatively deserted. The girl sat there, mouth opening and closing as she tried to come up with a response. She knew she was cuter than most girls her age. If she asked, most people did whatever she wanted. Naturally, she tried to manipulate her brother the same way.
"B-but my knee hurts."
"It's proof that you're still alive. Be glad."

“I—I want you to carry me. I won’t be able to make it back home if you don’t.”
“Really? Then just stay here. If you don’t like that, then walk back by yourself, brat.”
“Jerkface!”
“I’m fine with being a jerk! If I have to choose between being your slave and being a jerk, I’ll happily be a jerk!” he declared with a grin.
He really was the lowest of the low. Probably the absolute worst—okay, well, the third worst—man in my entire life.
The man who’d abandoned her and her child took first place. Second place went to that parasite she’d dated who leeched all that money off of her. She supposed her older brother came after those two.
Marie tried to remember what happened next that night, but…
That’s weird. How did things turn out in the end? I can’t seem to recall…

***

Slowly, she opened her eyes.
Dust hung in the air like a thick curtain, and gunshots echoed around her.
Marie lifted her head. Leon stood nearby, his back turned. “Next?!” His voice was strained. Their situation sounded dire.
“Two unidentified creatures crawling across the ceiling, heading our way. Master, be careful. You only have a limited number of rounds. And these are no ordinary monsters.”
“No kidding. These nasty things that don’t even disappear when they die.”
Leon took aim, blowing the head off an eerie-looking beast that darted out of the shadows. It crashed to the floor, where it convulsed.
“Eek!” Marie leaped up—or at least, she tried to. “Ah, ouch!” Pain jolted through her ankle, and she crumpled back to the ground.
Leon didn’t even glance back at her, too wary of the enemies approaching.
“Finally awake? Luxion will explain the situation.”
“Huh? What?”
“The two of you fell after the floor of the ruins collapsed,” Luxion said.
“While you were unconscious, several unidentified creatures attempted to get the jump on us, and Master took them out.”
“What do you mean ‘unidentified creatures’?!” *Does that mean they’re different from monsters?* Marie glanced over at the fallen one nearby. It had the head and torso of a human, but its arms and legs were distinctly reptilian.
Marie shrieked in terror. “Noooo!”
“Shut up! You’ll distract me!” Leon barked. “Do I seriously have to protect someone as useless as you? I mean, if it were Angie or Livia, I’d at least feel motivated to take the job seriously.”
“You screaming won’t improve our situation,” Luxion lectured her as well. “Please remain quiet.”

“B-but my leg…”
“You’re the Saint. Don’t you specialize in healing magic?” Luxion asked.
“Please deal with your injuries yourself. Master, the next one is coming.”
They were both so cold to her…
This jerk is just like my older brother! Urgh, he really irritates me!

Chapter 2:
The Ruin's Secret

"WHAT IN THE WORLD is this?"
Angie and the others had made their way deeper into the ruins only to discover a deep hole in the ground. She held her lantern over it, illuminating an endless darkness. The hole seemed quite deep. By the look of it, the floor had collapsed just moments ago.
"Don't tell me the two of them fell?"
What sounded like gunshots echoed up from the pit. Angie's stomach twisted.
"I'll get a rope," said Jilk, already prepared to descend.
Greg held up his spear. "I'm going in. There's a good chance both Bartfort and Marie are down there. We need to hurry."
"I—I'm going, too!" said Livia.
"You stay."
"No, I'm going!"
Just then, the village leader dashed in, bellowing, "What do you think you're doing?!"
Angie remained firm in the face of his anger. "The floor caved in. We think the other two may have fallen in. We're heading in after them."
"Y-you can't—no, I understand." The leader sighed. "I'll head down to help them myself. The rest of you wait here, please."
"They're fighting down there!" Greg protested. "What are you going to do if something happens to Marie?!"
"If *you* want to help, head back to town and let the other villagers know. Have them come as well," the leader instructed. He took his rifle from the holster at his back and leapt down into the hole.
Angie's eyes followed him, suspicion weighing on her. *He didn't even hesitate, did he?*
Even though they had no idea what might be lying in wait.
The echo of gunfire continued, unabated.

***

Luxion lit our surroundings while Marie and I made our way down a passage.
"Now I remember," I said. "In the game, there was an underground area you could explore in the ruins."
Parts of the ruin had collapsed, blocking our path with boulders and dirt. The place was virtually a labyrinth now.

I glanced over my shoulder at Marie. “I thought you used your healing magic already? You sure are walking slow.” She was limping, and I had to slow my pace to match hers.
Marie scowled. “I can heal it, but the pain lingers for a bit! Walk slower!”
“Livia’s healing is powerful enough to make the pain go away, too. This is exactly why I called you a fraud.”
“Excuse me?! That girl may be a *little* cute, but you sound obsessed, like a loser. You’re a no-name background character, remember? No one’s going to give you the time of day.”
I chuckled. “Hate to break it to you, but I’m actually pretty popular with the ladies right now. I have a mountain of letters begging me for tea parties.” Not that I loved that, but I smirked about it just to piss her off.
Marie wrinkled her nose.
Time to change the subject. “So what made you decide to try the reverse-harem route anyway?”
“Got a problem with it? It’s only natural to take happiness where you can find it.”
Happiness? What kind of motivation was that?
“You must feel pretty big then, huh? Kicking Livia out of her rightful place so you could get your own giggles? You owe her an apology.”
Marie’s gaze dropped to the floor. “What would you know?” she mumbled. “I was miserable in my previous life. What’s wrong with wanting to live the way I want in this one? I just… I just want to be happy!”
But the way she went about it was just cruel. She already had five men at her beck and call, yet she kept making mistakes—ones she could never hope to undo.
“You got in Livia’s way and then you set a trap for Angie. You really are a lowlife,” I said.
Then Luxion had to go and interject. “I believe the same could be said about you, Master. You found and took me for yourself even though you said I was originally intended for Olivia. Then you beat the life out of those five boys in front of the entire school. I believe you called the experience ‘exhilarating.’”
Marie glared at me. “You really are a worm. You have no right to lecture me.”
“You’re the last person I want to hear that from! Besides, it’s your fault I’ve had to suffer like this. What are you even planning to do for the final fight? If you screw things up, the kingdom will lose the war.”
In the game, Miss Hertrude used the Magic Flute to summon the final boss. The kingdom currently had both the princess and her flute in its possession, so the chances of things going down exactly the same way were low, but I still worried.
“Duh. I’ll use my Saint power to win.”
“What? You really think you can solve everything with the Saint’s power? And what about Livia’s power, huh?” I demanded.
“What are you talking about? Her power *is* the Saint’s power, right?”

I shook my head. “No! That’s what I’ve been trying to—”
Luxion interrupted us. “Master, I think I’ve found an answer to one of my suspicions.”
The area around us suddenly lit up, and I had to squint against the brightness. Once my eyes adjusted, I realized we’d entered a large room lined with tons of luminous capsules, each filled with liquid.
“Oh boy. You’ve gotta be kidding me.”
“Eek!”
Creatures floated inside the capsules—creatures that resembled humans. But they weren’t the only thing we had to worry about.
A number of elves stood, waiting for us, holding rifles and pistols.
I stepped in front of Marie and held up my own gun. I still had a laundry list of questions I wanted to ask her, so I couldn’t let her die here.
One of the elves gave us an eerie smile. “Welcome, humans and strange round thing, to the place that gave birth to mankind. Your timing is impeccable. We were in need of more research subjects.”
Excuse me?
I realized then that the elves were wearing white lab coats, like some kind of mad scientists.
“Are you the one who made the beasts in these ruins?” I asked.
Ordinary monsters disappeared after being defeated, but the creatures down here remained even after you killed them. Whatever they were, they weren’t run-of-the-mill beasties.
“How observant.” The elf speaking kept the barrel of his gun trained on me. “I didn’t expect you lot to even notice.” He reached out and gently stroked one of the capsules. Inside floated an enormous flower with a human face at its center.
Talk about creepy. Far more unsettling than any monster I’d ever seen.
“We here have encroached upon God’s territory,” he went on. “We create life. I am sure this exceeds your base, human comprehension, but civilizations of the ancient past were far more technologically advanced. Elves ruled back then, not you mere humans. These ruins prove it.”
So this ancient facility had once been used to develop new life-forms. Since elves inhabited the island, they naturally assumed that proved elves had created humans.
The elf chuckled. “You still don’t get it? I’m telling you that your species is primitive. Our ancestors produced all kinds of life-forms in this place—you humans were one of those inferior races.”
“No way! I don’t remember that being part of the game!” Marie protested.
Oh, come on, don’t buy into his crap.
Still, it sent chills down my spine to think that elves had been down here cooking up creepy-crawlies since who knew when. I glanced questioningly at Luxion. He discreetly moved his eye from side to side, as if to say no—he disagreed.

“We’re going to take back the world you humans stole from us,” the elf boasted, drunk on his own vision. “From now on, elves will reign supreme. We’ll guide this world down the righteous path. Your sacrifices will further that goal. Now, what experiments shall we perform on you first? Ah, yes…”
“You’re mistaken,” Luxion said. “Humans managed this facility. And the creatures they created…are you elves.”
I gaped at him. Luxion had expressed a number of suspicions thus far, but this came out of nowhere.
Marie pinched the edge of my shirt and tugged while glancing at Luxion. “Hey, what is that familiar of yours anyway?”
“Luxion. He’s a cheat item. You know about him, right?”
“I didn’t until now. A cheat item, though? That’s not fair! Give him to me.”
“I do appreciate that you choose to be *openly* despicable.”
The elf’s expression contorted. “The *humans* made *us*? What a pitiful attempt at humor.”
“I managed to tap into this facility’s artificial intelligence,” Luxion went on, “which had been dormant. We have shared files, and thus I have determined this place was a testing site where humans pursued research outside ethical boundaries.”
As if in response, a robotic voice echoed around us. “That is correct. The elves inhabiting this island are feral descendants of the subjects created in this lab.”
The voice differed just a bit from Luxion’s; it was more feminine, for one.
“Another artificial intelligence?” I glanced around, but I didn’t see a body or mainframe or anything.
“Correct,” the voice answered. “I have spent many years in sleep mode. It is a pleasure to meet someone who carries the genes of the old humans. You are proof that our fight was not in vain.”
The lead elf glanced around frantically. “Wh-who are you?!” he bellowed. “Enough of your lies! We elves are clearly the superior race. We have longer life spans, and we’re more skilled at using magic!”
“We gave you long life spans to ensure you could be deployed in battle for as long as possible,” the AI responded matter-of-factly. “Premature, natural deaths would have been inconvenient. Your skill with magic was also our design. Although I must say, our first subjects were significantly stronger. Your abilities have deteriorated over the generations.”
While the other elves began to panic, their representative trembled in front of us, red with rage. His gaze darted about, trying to decide where he should aim his gun. “Quit playing with us!” he screamed. “That can’t be true. We are the real—”
I sensed someone behind us and swung around to find the village leader. “What do you think you’re doing?!” he shouted.
“Oh, it’s you—uh…?” Gullible Marie clearly assumed he was here to save us, until she noticed the gun he had trained on her.
“I see,” said Luxion. “So the village leader was an accomplice.”

Seeing his comrades in disarray, the village leader snapped at them. “Finish these humans off. We need to make it look like the other research subjects were responsible.”
The elves scrambled into action. Some flew to a control panel, which at their command made the capsules discharge their fluid and release the beasts within.
“Perhaps I should at least praise them for figuring out how to work the controls,” Luxion remarked.
I lifted my rifle. “So they plan to kill us and erase the evidence? Elves are every bit as underhanded as they look.”
The leader laughed at me. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, human. Inferior creatures like you should bow your heads to the likes of us!”
“How foolish,” the female AI lamented. “I have classified this as an emergency situation. Commencing countermeasures.”
Panels opened on the walls, and weapons popped out, blasting right through the artificial creatures the elves had unleashed. The elves cowered in fear.
In the midst of the confusion, I fired my gun and sent a bullet tearing through the village leader’s shoulder.
“Argh!”
He dropped his weapon, and I charged him, slamming the butt of my rifle into his face.
“Shoot him!” the elves screamed.
Marie threw her arms over her head. “Nooo! I can’t take this!”
You sure are noisy! I turned to Luxion. “Do it.”
“I’m afraid you’ll need to do better than that if you want to harm my master.”
A wall of light encompassed us, deflecting the elves’ onslaught of magic and bullets.
I aimed my gun at the leader and glared at the other elves. Once they realized none of their weapons would work against us, they ceased firing and stood there, frozen.
“You wanna keep going?” I taunted. “You elves are supposed to be clever and noble, so I assume you know when to give up. Unless you’re feeling suicidal?”
It was clear they couldn’t win. They threw their weapons down and held their hands up in surrender.
“Time to restrain them all. You.” I pointed to Marie. “Hop to it.”
“Hold on a sec! I’m the Saint, which means I’m *your* boss!”
“Want a bullet in your head? Pretty sure I can destroy the evidence and make it look like an accident if I do it now.”
Not that I had any intention of actually following through with that, but it forced a smile out of Marie. “Oh, come on, don’t be angry. I—I’ll help out, I swear. Don’t shoot me.”
Tsk, where was that attitude to begin with?

***

After we tied up all the elves, the feminine AI called out to Luxion and me.
“I understand our side lost, which means it is time for this facility to self-destruct.”
I shook my head. “You lot sure do like to blow yourselves up. Luxion had the same reaction when I first met him.”
She wouldn’t back down. “This facility was constructed in order to devise a way to resist the new humans. However, now that it is clear we failed, it is too dangerous to leave intact.”
True. I didn’t want to see anybody like these elves getting their hands on the place. These ruins had to go.
“But are you sure about this?” I asked. “After you finally woke up?”
She had managed this place for centuries, had just woken up after ages of sleep, and now she had to go and blow herself up. It just seemed cruel.
“Yes, it is fine this way. Luxion, I will be handing my data over to you. If you require anything from this facility, please take it with you. Also, take this along as well. A migrant ship like yours will need it.”
A number of floating, glimmering cube-like structures popped out of the ground.
“Yes, let’s take these,” Luxion agreed. “They will improve my performance.”
“What are they?” I asked.
“Incredibly valuable items.”
Excited, Marie hopped over. “Treasure!”
“Indeed. Treasure as far as we AI are concerned, but since your world wouldn’t know what to do with them, they’re little more than useless toys to you.”
She deflated. “This really is the worst. There’s no treasure at all. Maybe this place really is totally different from the game. I mean, I thought this was supposed to be a fantasy word. No one told me there’d be a bunch of science fiction crap.”
Marie had a point; the old humans had created the elves to combat the new humans. Most likely, the same went for the other demi-human races as well. This truly was a mysterious universe we’d stumbled into. Not at all the run-of-the-mill fantasy with swords and magic that we had imagined.
So much for a fluffy, lighthearted otome game.
“Is there no other treasure?” Marie asked, shoulders slumped.
“I am not sure why you would expect treasure from a research facility, but no, there is not,” the AI responded.
Marie wiped her tears with her sleeve. “I’m going home.”
Admittedly, it was kind of pitiful to see her go through all this and come out with nothing.
“However,” the AI continued, “I do have an item I would appreciate you taking with you. Perhaps you might find some value in it.”

“What? So you do have some treasure! Hurry up and hand it over!”
Marie instantly perked up, just like my little sister used to.
Honestly, some part of me couldn’t help suspecting she and Marie were one and the same…but the last thing I needed was to meet that brat again in my second life.

***

We were some distance away from the ruins, and I was still having a hell of a time calming Luxion down. If I had to find some way to express his sounds with human letters it would basically be: “Asdfghjkl!”
“Seriously, cool your jets.”
“I am perfectly calm,” he said. “And I will remain levelheaded as I blast this place to bits, pound it to sand, burn it to ash, and obliterate it until absolutely no trace remains—graaah!”
He’s snapped.
Marie was so devastated by the lack of treasure that she’d collapsed on the ground, her expression vacant. “This isn’t remotely what I wanted.”
Jilk and Greg tried to reassure her, though they were both just relieved to find her safe.
“At least nothing happened to you.”
“That’s right, Marie. Safety comes first. We can always search for more treasure later.”
On the ground in front of us lay the last item the ruin’s AI had requested we take. It looked like some spike-covered part of an Armor, but I had no idea *what* part. Marie wouldn’t stop whining about how this piece of junk wouldn’t net her any money.
To make things worse, Luxion had, you know, lost it.
Flustered, Livia tried to console him. “Please calm down, Lux! Come on, deep breaths. Deep breaths!”
“I do not require oxygen.”
“Oh, um, that’s right. S-sorry.”
His calm reply totally threw her off. Augh, adorable.
Angie stood beside me, trying to get a bead on the situation. “Leon, can you explain why you refuse to release the village leader despite his injury? And where did you find all these other elves? Don’t tell me they were being held down there?” She eyed them suspiciously.
I was genuinely at a loss for what to do with those guys. I could hardly explain the whole artificial life thing, but how else could I justify passing judgment on them?
“Yeah, about that… See, these guys kinda—whoa.”
The ground rumbled, throwing us all off balance. I reached to steady Angie, and the two of us turned our eyes toward the ruins.

Angie gaped in shock. The facility underground had safely self-destructed after all. Well, *safely* was maybe an odd word choice, but at least this way no one could create any more of those creepy beasties.
This is for the best.
Then the sky above us rippled unnaturally, just enough to catch my attention. While the outline was faint, I made out an enormous airship. Luxion's main body. His optical camouflage helped conceal him, mostly.
"Hey!" I glared at him.
"This is punishment for deceiving me," he replied icily. "Punishment for forcing this loathsome *thing* on me!"
In his rage, he fired a shot from the main ship, and a beam of light descended on the ruins.
The village leader quivered. "Don't tell me the head elder spoke the truth?! It's the demon king. We've angered him!"
Sorry, that's not your fairy tale, that's my partner throwing a hissy fit.
The other elves' faces contorted in horror, as if they thought the end of the world was nigh. They couldn't tear their eyes away from the bright pillar shooting down from the sky.
Only Miss Hertrude ignored it, her gaze instead focused on the Armor fragment we'd brought. Strangely, I felt like I'd seen the shape somewhere before. Black and spiky… Yeah, definitely familiar, but I couldn't remember exactly why.
Miss Hertrude approached me. "May I have a word?"
"Hmm?"
"Would you mind handing this over to me? If you want money, I am more than willing to provide it." The expression on her face was far too serious. She had to be up to something.
"I'll pass," I said.
"Whatever you want, as long as it's within my power to give it to you, I will. And also, please know I meant it when I suggested you switch your allegiance. I promise you would be rewarded with a rank befitting someone of your skill. The kingdom has no true claim to your loyalty, does it?"
I hesitated, but only for a moment. "Nah, I don't need anything from you."
Her brows knit. "You really are fixated, aren't you? I expected a regional lord would understand the kingdom is detestable. Or have they domesticated you so well that you don't even realize your oppression?"
Oh, like I could argue with that! Still, switching allegiances wasn't a simple matter. How could I guarantee Miss Hertrude would follow up on her promises? Especially when she came from an enemy nation, and one that absolutely loathed me at that. If I conceded and followed her to the principality, they might as easily arrest me for a public execution.
Dammit, I really shouldn't have crawled so far up the principality's butt.
"Not interested," I said finally.
"I see. That's too bad. Truly a shame."

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By the time we returned to the elf village, the head elder was waiting for us. Dozens of elves had fled their houses to kneel on the ground and pray to the heavens.
“Please, demon king, forgive us!”
“Spare our island, please!”
“This is why I was against it! I knew the village leader would disturb the ruins!”
Kyle surveyed their reactions with a mocking grin on his face, though it disappeared almost as quickly. I pretended not to see it. He clearly had his reasons for disdaining his fellows.
Greg scanned the area as he and Jilk carried the Armor fragment. “The atmosphere here sure has changed.”
“I thought they might blame us for destroying the ruins,” added Jilk, “but it seems that’s not the case.”
The head elder made her way over to us. She glanced at the captive elves we’d brought back and mumbled something to the assistant supporting her.
“She says she would like to speak with you regarding how you want to handle these elves,” the assistant relayed. “If possible, we’d like one of you to act as a representative for your party and come to the head elder’s estate.”
I’d figured we would have to explain things, so I stepped up.
The head elder glanced over at Marie.
“You want me to drag her along, too?” I asked.
“Yes,” the assistant confirmed. “Please bring the black-haired girl and those other two girls as well.”
Greg and Jilk would apparently be spared, so they set their burden down to take a break.
“You guys go on ahead,” said Greg. “We’ll get this thing to the ship.”
“Indeed,” Jilk agreed. “It would be a pain to lug back and forth. The faster we get it to the *Partner*, the better.”
Luxion’s voice filled with disgust. “Do you truly intend to put that filth on *my* ship?”
“Give it up already,” I grumbled. “Come on, let’s get moving.”
This little jerk really called that Armor fragment “filth.”

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As we took our seats across from the elder at her estate, we were surprised to hear her assistant say, “The head elder would like to thank all of you.”
Marie blushed. “You don’t have to thank us. But if you’re feeling generous, you could give us treasure or something of value. I’d love that.”

Angie glared daggers at Marie, silencing her. “We’ve done nothing to deserve a reward. If anything, it’s our fault the ruins were destroyed. We don’t deserve your gratitude.”
The head elder shook her head.
“The elder says she’s relieved that the ancient demon king only destroyed the ruins. We’re fortunate that was the extent of his anger.”
Again with the demon king, huh?
“Uh, um!” Livia piped up. “I know this is unrelated, but what does it mean to be ‘impure’? Miss Yumeria used that word to describe herself, and Kyle has also been acting strange. Could you explain for us?”
Marie sneered at Livia’s obvious worry. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t bring other people’s servants into the conversation, thank you very much.”
“B-but I can’t just leave things the way they are. He’s clearly not acting normal.” Livia had a point there.
The head elder’s assistant averted her gaze as she answered, “You’re aware that elven beauty standards are based on one’s mana, yes? Each individual’s mana is unique. It would be difficult to describe to a human, but we judge them in terms of their color. However, some rare elves are born with several different colors mixed together.”
That didn’t mean much to any of us, but apparently elves considered it, uh, weird.
“Elves with that type of mana possess strong, special magical powers. However, others cannot help but look at them with contempt. The villagers refer to such people as ‘impure.’”
So they have access to more than just your standard magic? I assumed that meant it was biological in some way.
“To add to that,” the assistant continued, “Kyle’s mother left the village for a period to work as a traveling entertainer. During that time, she became pregnant with a human’s child.”
Angie’s eyes flew wide open. “I’ve heard rumors, but you’re saying he’s a real half-elf? So they really exist?”
The woman nodded. “Half-elves have an awkward position in our society. Their existence is especially problematic for the men who work as personal servants to human women.”
Elves fetched a high price partly because of their inability to procreate with humans. If it got out that wasn’t entirely true, even if rarely, they feared women might hesitate to purchase them.
Would they really, though? In fact, there were probably some creeps out there who would get a thrill out of it. *This world really is awful.*
“So that’s why he said he was a half-elf!” Marie gasped.
Oh, come on! I ignored her. “So basically, the village considers both him and his mother eyesores. Well, leaving that aside for now—”
“Leon, please, you can’t just end the conversation there!” Livia scolded.
Really, what did she want me to do? “Even if we poke our noses into this, we can’t solve anything for them. Isn’t it enough to understand why Kyle

hates this place? As for Miss Yumeria, it's not like we can just tell the villagers to stop being jerks to her. We don't control them."
Sadness washed over the assistant's face as she dropped her gaze. "You're right about that. Unfortunately, there really is nothing you can do to resolve this matter."
The elder leaned toward her assistant and started whispering.
"The head elder says she has already foretold your futures. Conveying what she has seen is the only form of thanks she can give you right now."
It was obvious she didn't have much money to spare. Her accommodations were far more modest than the village leader's.
Might as well take her up on it. I shrugged.
"First, we'll begin with the Saint."
"Fortune-telling, huh?" Marie perked up. "All right then, let's hear it. You better give me the best fortune you can."
She really is full of herself. Now that I'd thought it, I couldn't stop unseeing my little sister. That brat had religiously checked her horoscope every morning.
"You have been born to a strange fate. You have a destined partner, but somehow, you have yet to connect."
"Who is this destined partner?!" Marie leaned forward.
The assistant shook her head. "That, she doesn't know, but the two of you have already met. However, now that you have split paths, you will never again be together. Also…"
"Yeah, what?"
"You cannot escape the hand fate has dealt you. A harsh fate awaits you. Either you will obtain everything, or you will lose it all. Those are the only paths left for you."
Marie's mouth fell open. At last she shrieked, "Again! I demand a redo!"
"Now, for the black-haired girl—"
"Hey, I'm talking to you!"
Miss Hertrude waited quietly for the woman to continue, looking utterly disinterested.
"The head elder says there will soon be a turning point in your life, and with it will come great hardship."
"Oh, really?"
"But that hardship will bring you your fated partner. If you can walk at their side, a light will shine on you and ease your troubles. They will become a source of great strength and support."
"Tr-truly? Well, I'll keep that in mind." Miss Hertrude looked like a giddy schoolgirl the way she smiled. Guess she liked the sound of a fated partner.
I envy her in that.
"Next is you."
"Me?" Angie had been waiting anxiously. She had an eager smile on her face.
I guess fortune-telling isn't always so bad.

The assistant hesitated after the elder whispered to her.
“Wh-what is it?” Angie asked. “You’re making me antsy.”
“You and that girl over there…” she motioned to Livia “…seem to be protected by a hero. A hero to whom even the ancient demon king bends his knee. Though I cannot say for sure whether you have met him all ready or if you will meet him in the future.”
“A hero?” Angie tilted her head.
Livia was similarly confused. “I guess you always see heroes in a certain kind of fairy tale—usually the sort boys like. But I don’t know anyone quite like that.”
“Me neither,” Angie agreed. “Besides, who is this demon king?”
She and Livia conferred with one another quietly.
As for me, I thought this whole fortune-telling thing was starting to sound fishy. Plus, the elder was really stuck on that demon king thing. Well, not like I could tell them why they were wrong. *And she’s kinda lost whatever gift she had, right? If she was ever a real fortune-teller to begin with.*
To be clear, if there really was some hero out there, I was more than ready for him to show. He needed to hurry up and save this stupid world. And me, too, while he was at it. I genuinely wanted him to sweep me off my feet already.
“If the elder is feeling tired, maybe you should let her rest?” I suggested.
The assistant shook her head. “N-no, she’s fine. Um, this next one will also be for the both of you.” She motioned to Angie and Livia. Even the assistant seemed to be getting suspicious about the validity of these claims. The atmosphere had taken an awkward turn, but we politely listened nonetheless.
“Your futures are intricately intertwined. You have been greatly diverted from the path intended for you. Someone else has taken on the burdens you were originally supposed to bear.”
Livia’s face scrunched. “Uh, um…do you mean someone is helping us?”
“I think so. Or rather, someone has already helped you both.”
Angie glanced at me. “Well, true, we have been helped a number of times.”
The assistant frowned, clearly troubled. “She said your fates are so complex, she can’t view them clearly. Although, she is quite certain about this hero.”
Angie and Livia both glanced at me.
“You don’t think…”
“Well, you could say…”
I shook my head firmly. “No, definitely not.”
Marie rolled her eyes. “Of course not. He’s just a stupid background character.”
Miss Hertrude seemed equally exasperated. “You think far too highly of yourself.”
Okay, the way they put it so bluntly pissed me off.

As I cursed them inwardly, Livia pleaded with the head elder. “Um, please tell Leon’s future as well!”
Angie nodded. “Y-yes, please do. It would be a shame to leave him out when you’ve told everyone else’s, right? Not that I’m curious. I just think we should all have ours told so it’s fair.”
I glanced over at the elder. “No worries, you look after you. I don’t really care.”
The old woman straightened. Her voice was quiet and hoarse, as if she were straining to speak audibly.
I just said you don’t have to push yourself, old lady! You’re making me look like a jerk here.
“Thank you for saving the community of Fan. It seems you truly are a kind person,” she croaked.
Marie and Miss Hertrude’s eyes went wide with surprise.
What, do you guys have some kind of problem? Not to brag or anything, but I really am a nice guy.
More importantly, why were we only now learning this place called itself Fan?
“I’m afraid my foresight isn’t strong enough to see into your future. However, I can tell you this—you will eventually…lose something precious… A difficult decision awaits…”
Wow, what a wonderfully vague way to prophesy my oncoming doom. “Uh, Miss Elder? Could you try for something a little more concrete?”
She went silent.
“Uh, Elder Lady?”
The assistant leaned over to prop the woman up. “It seems she’s exhausted.”
“Hold on a minute!” I leaped to my feet and grabbed the elder by the shoulders. “Come on, you gotta open your eyes! I’m begging you here, give me something more to work with! Don’t say something that ominous then fall asleep on me!”
Angie and Livia lunged forward to pry me off the old woman.
“Leon, get a hold of yourself!”
“Leon, bad! Treating an elderly woman like that is a no-no!”
Yeah, sure, but how was I supposed to accept this?!
Marie and Miss Hertrude chuckled in amusement.
“Now *that* was entertaining.”
“Indeed, you poor thing.”
They didn’t feel the least bit sorry for me. I’d known Marie was rotten from the start, but Jerktrude wasn’t proving any better.
“Nooo, I don’t want this!” I moaned. “I demand a redo!”
Luxion, floating quietly nearby, mumbled, “You said you didn’t believe in this nonsense, yet here you are, throwing a tantrum.”
“Shut up! No one else would take this lying down either!”

I didn’t care if I looked lame. I wanted to live my life in peace! What did she even mean, saying I’d “lose something precious”?!

Chapter 3:
An Ill Fate

I WATCHED FROM THE DECK as the elves' floating island gradually receded in the distance.

Beside me, Luxion said, "I thought you said you wouldn't butt your nose into other people's affairs?"

Another person stood on the deck with us—Miss Yumeria, who also gazed back at her homeland. An old leather traveling bag sat on the ground beside her. She wore a complicated mix of emotions on her face, ranging from excitement to melancholy.

"I couldn't just leave things the way they were," I said. "Would you have preferred me to tell the elves to just knock it off? We both know that wouldn't work. This was the best option."

"That aside," he continued, "I am surprised the elves were willing to let her go. It was amusing to see the women agree that you should take her while the men were reluctant."

"Yeah, and their reasons made my stomach turn. 'She could damage our market value,' blech."

"You can't really blame them. The slave trade makes up a substantial part of their income."

I scoffed. "Yeah, and it's revolting. But bringing her along does give me a satisfying advantage."

"True," Luxion agreed. "You can now drop said market value whenever you feel like it."

"Exactly. I've got my hands on priceless blackmail here. I'll be sure to use it wisely."

The male elves were all paranoid about Miss Yumeria's story coming to light. They'd pitched a real fit when I said she was coming with me. I prevailed, but it took some effort. The other women and the head elder were on my side, but I really tipped the scales when I mentioned the demon king. That silenced all opposition. They were pretty shaken.

Pretty satisfying for me, though.

Miss Yumeria approached me, holding her bag in both hands. "Uh, um, what's going to happen to me now?"

I softened my tone to reassure her and answered honestly. "I could use a live-in servant back home to look after the place. I'd like to hire you."

"B-but I'm…" She trailed off. Miss Yumeria didn't have much self-confidence; actually, she was rather pessimistic and withdrawn. It was a miracle she'd ever made it as a traveling entertainer.

"The elven standard of beauty is irrelevant to us humans," I said. "You know that, right?"

“That’s not… They call me a dolt. A dimwit. I’m afraid I won’t really be of any use to you.”
Jeez, those elves had been jerks, huh? The whole society had proven pretty dark with all its judgmental tendencies. Heartbreaking, if you asked me. Although, given the elves I’d met at the academy, I couldn’t be entirely surprised.
“Don’t worry. Besides, I have other reasons for—”
Kyle cut me off when he stomped over, his face contorted with anger.
“What’s the meaning of this?!” he snarled.
“What’s the meaning of what?”
“Dragging my mother out of the village. Do you understand what this means?”
Miss Yumeria clung to his arm. “Hold on, Kyle. He was worried about me, and—”
“Be quiet! It’s precisely because you’re this gullible that people always take advantage of you! Do you even know what kind of person this man is? He’s the lowest scumbag in the entire academy!” Kyle bellowed so loudly that he drew the attention of everyone on deck.
“The *lowest*? Well, now that’s just mean.”
Do I overdo it sometimes? Sure. But I wouldn’t say I’m the lowest. If anyone deserves that title…maybe Marie? But definitely not me.
“I’m only telling the truth.” Kyle glared at me. “You beat the crap out of the prince in front of the entire school. What would you call that?!”
“An action worthy of praise from the palace? What was it they said? ‘A noble knight rightfully admonished the prince.’ Sorry to burst your bubble.”
“This is exactly what I’m talking about!”
“Kyle, um, listen…uh…” Miss Yumeria seemed shocked at her son’s behavior.
Sadly, her response only seemed to add fuel to the flames. It was like all his frustrations had come boiling to the surface. Kyle laid into her without pity.
“See, you’re hesitating! You’re so spineless. It was the same back in the village. That’s why everyone can take advantage of you. That’s why we’re so poor! They curse you, call you impure, condescend to you, and use you for all you’re worth. You can’t just keep smiling like a fool and let them get away with it!”
Miss Yumeria lowered her chin, tears welling in her eyes.
Unable to watch any longer, I tried to intervene, but—
“What’s with that attitude?!” Livia jumped between us.
“What’s *your* problem?” Kyle snapped. “This has nothing to do with you. Stay out of it!”
“I can’t just stand by and watch. How dare you talk to your mother like that. Apologize!” Livia was normally a profoundly soft-spoken girl, but right now she shouted Kyle down like a terrifying older sister.
Kyle shrank back. “Y-you don’t know anything about us. It’s her fault I grew up so poor. Do you even get why I’m working at this age? Do you know how

I was treated when I lived in the village? You look down your nose at me, but you don't have a clue what I've been through!"
With that, he burst into tears and fled, ducking back inside the ship. Gone was his usual bratty attitude. That was most likely the true Kyle beneath the mask—what a scary thought. He'd just been pretending to be that cocky kid.
Livia tried to chase after him, but Miss Yumeria stopped her. "Pl-please wait. I'm the one in the wrong. It's just like he said. I'm a terrible parent, and he's suffered so much."
Hoo boy. Other people were watching, so I dragged the two of them inside.

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Once we slipped into an empty room, we let Miss Yumeria fill us in on the details.
Apparently, her position in the village (and subsequently the way people treated her) was even worse than we'd imagined.
"Those of us who are impure like me can't use ordinary magic. I wasn't able to help the village the way I was supposed to. Like everyone else could."
"I thought the head elder said something about elves like you being able to use special magic, though?" Livia said.
Miss Yumeria nodded. "There is a limit to what I can do, but this is one of the few things I'm good at." She happily produced a flowerpot and a small packet from her bag.
She seriously put a flowerpot in there?
She opened the packet and produced a single seed. As she put her hand over it, it began to grow and bloomed into a flower.
"That's incredible," I said, genuinely impressed.
Luxion agreed. "With that kind of power, it's hard to believe she was treated so poorly in the village. Ordinarily, I would expect them to prize such an ability and guard you jealously. Their contempt must have overridden any logical thought."
Miss Yumeria's ears burned bright red with embarrassment. "I-It's really not that amazing. I am severely limited in what I can do. But I think for the village, it wasn't just because I was impure. I'd given birth to a half-elf, as well."
Livia was still confused by that. "But what's so wrong about that?"
Miss Yumeria hesitated at first but explained. "It's true that impure elves are looked upon with disdain, even though it's thanks to their unique powers that our community has continued to exist. However, I left our island so I could discover more of the outside world. There…a nobleman captured me and held me at his estate for some time. Terrible things happened to me there."
Lines formed in Livia's forehead. Innocent as she was, she knew what Miss Yumeria had endured. She opened her mouth, perhaps to offer some kind words, but nothing came out.

“When I became pregnant,” Miss Yumeria continued, “the noble cast me aside. But when I returned home, my people were opposed to me giving birth. All because a half-elf could damage their value. But I was already so far along at the time, and…and I *wanted* to have the baby.”
It broke my heart watching her tears fall, one after another.
“That’s just…” Livia’s voice was thick with upset.
Luxion, on the other hand, was entirely unmoved. “I understand their anxieties but not why they assumed it would be a problem. You could have simply kept quiet about it.”
Miss Yumeria shook her head. “You wouldn’t necessarily know at first glance, but there is a difference between elves and half-elves. Kyle matures at the same rate as a human.”
“Then why did you sell him?” I blurted.
Miss Yumeria pressed a hand over her mouth and sobbed. “The slave merchant took a liking to Kyle, and the village leader said he couldn’t refuse the merchant’s request.”
Livia and I were having a hard time following, but Luxion helpfully explained. “The power dynamic in this arena is skewed toward the merchants; it seems likely this merchant used knowledge of half-elves as leverage.”
Miss Yumeria nodded. “They knew all about our concerns—our circumstances. They also don’t want to see our market value drop, so they had us keep quiet about it, even as we took him. There was…a lot happening. A bad winter. The village might not have made it if Kyle hadn’t gone along with it. He didn’t even say a word to me. Just sold himself off and left the money behind.”
He had worried about her. The contrast was striking. I hadn’t had a care in the world at his age. All I’d done was play around.
Dammit. This world really is a cruel one.
“He only lashes out at me because he has so much pent-up frustration. He really is a good son. His salary isn’t very high, but he still sends me what he can.”
Livia’s gaze dropped to the floor. After hearing everything, she felt ashamed of herself. “I said some awful things to Kyle without knowing anything about him.”
I liked this part of her. I really did.
“You weren’t wrong when you said it though. I think you’re fine. But don’t worry, I’ll have a talk with him,” I said.
“Oh, butting in again?” Luxion asked.
I shrugged. “I *am* Miss Yumeria’s employer now. I think a certain level of care is necessary here, right?”
“You certainly are good at finding excuses, Master.”
“Oh, shut it.”
Luxion had a point, though. Why was I the one making a point of looking out for Kyle? Wasn’t that Marie’s job? But I got the feeling she wouldn’t be able

to handle it. It had to be me. Plus, something about parent-child relationships made me weak. At this rate, I wasn't going to be able to make fun of Kyle anymore.
Best I clear things up as quickly as possible.

***

I found Kyle hiding at the dead end of a narrow passageway in the ship.
"Hey, you stupid brat."
"What do you want, scumbag knight?"
This little jerk… He's not even remotely cute.
"I wanna talk to you about your mom."
His little pointed ears twitched, but he remained quiet.

“My parents just rebuilt their estate back home. It’s much bigger now than it was before, and they need more help. I’ve arranged it so your mom can live there as a servant and have enough money to take care of herself.”
“Like I believe you,” he snapped. “I bet you just fell for her looks so you stuck your nose into our business. I can’t trust you—or any other noble.”
Miss Yumeria was indeed beautiful. I couldn’t blame him for worrying I might have ulterior motives. She still looked youthful despite being older than me and having a kid. Also, her breasts were huge—ahem.
“Like I even get to go back home all that often,” I said. “And the baron—my father—may look like a barbarian, but he’s actually pretty straightforward. He definitely loves my mom too much to lay hands on anyone else. Probably.”
His head jerked up, and he glared at me. “I said: I can’t trust you.”
“I keep my promises. Besides, that’s not the only reason I want her around. She’s leverage against the elves. If they try anything funny, I can threaten to reveal the truth about your lineage. She’s plenty valuable for that reason alone. I get nothing out of mistreating her.”
Although considering how little faith the rest of the kingdom seemed to have in me, no one was likely to believe the truth even if I did reveal it. Still, it was worth it to make the elves believe I had the upper hand in future negotiations. As long as I could dangle this over their heads, I was satisfied.
Kyle went quiet.
“You’re welcome to visit her any time you want,” I said. “I’ll allow you—and *only* you—to enter our region freely. Don’t bring Marie.” Primarily because I hated her, but I also had a feeling she might do something sneaky if I let her visit my home.
Kyle dabbed his tears away with his sleeves. “She’s…” He hesitated. “My mother is too good-natured for her own well-being. And she’s gullible.”
“Sure is.”
“She undervalues herself, and she’s spineless…but she’s also very kind, so it’s impossible to hate her. She’s a terrible parent.”
That doesn’t sound like a kid who actually hates his mom.
Kyle stood up, rolling his shoulders back, and then bowed his head low. Gone was his usual snarky attitude. “Viscount, please take good care of my mother.”
Though he had an odd way of showing it, he really was worried about Miss Yumeria.
I nodded, easing his anxiety. But there was one other thing I wanted to ask about, something Luxion had told me. “By the way, I hear you used to change masters frequently. Was that because…”
Kyle lifted his arm to hide his eyes, perhaps to keep me from seeing his tears. “That’s obvious. I was searching for a master I could actually trust. And I landed a good one—the girl who bewitched the crown prince. But because of you, all of my plans went out the window.”
“Whoops?” I flashed him a cheeky grin.

He glared at me for a moment before letting out an exasperated sigh. “You really are an awful person. If things had stayed the way they were, I would have been set for life.”
I didn’t recall him being this calculating in the game. “Then why haven’t you given up on Marie yet?”
“I’m tired of searching. Plus, she’s the Saint now, so just being at her side makes me look good. For as incompetent as she looks, she’s got a good head.”
Funny he should say that, straining as she was under the weight of her family’s debt. Kyle had to be aware of that. Maybe he simply liked Marie as a person.
“One more thing,” he said. “You should be careful of the principality’s princess. She seems to be up to something.”
“Miss Hertrude?” I knew she was scheming, I just didn’t know what exactly. It didn’t seem like she had given up on getting revenge against the kingdom yet.
“She said a few things to me, and she talked to the village leader, too. There was something fishy about it. Well, I’m sure you’ll handle whatever it is just fine. You’re way more underhanded than she is.”
I narrowed my eyes at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“Exactly what it sounds like.”
So while the rest of us were in the ruins, Miss Hertrude had struck up a conversation with Kyle? Hm.

***

That night, I lugged a heavy bag up onto the deck. It contained the spiky black Armor fragment we’d brought along with us.
“Are you really going to do this?” I asked.
Luxion’s single red eye gleamed in the dark. “Of course. I’ve already made preparations. Destructive impulses like this are hardwired into me. In human terms, you might call it instinct. Every second that ticks by is a second wasted. I want to be rid of it as soon as possible.”
Huh, okay. Although the whole destructive impulses thing is mildly terrifying coming from an AI.
“They appear to have preserved it in that facility for research purposes, but it no longer has any such value,” he said. “Now, quickly!”
I pulled the fragment out from the bag. The moment I touched it, it pulsed beneath my fingertips.
“Ergh?! That feels disgusting!”
A crack appeared on the surface of the metal fragment. Then the edges peeled back to reveal an enormous eye. I yanked my hand away. It was so detailed it looked like a real, human eye—even though it was far bigger than any human’s.

As I watched, tentacles squeezed out from the edges of the crack around the eye and reached for me.
“Please be careful,” said Luxion. “That thing is alive.”
No kidding!
The fragment let out an unsettling, high-pitched cry.
As it did, Luxion emitted a beam from his red eye, blasting the fragment. First, he seared the tentacles away, then he focused his attack on the eye itself. Simultaneously, a gang of Luxion’s robots clambered toward us, snatched up the fragment, and heaved it overboard. As it plummeted, Luxion’s main body, still hidden nearby, fired a larger beam straight at it.
“Did you really have to go that far?” I asked.
His electronic voice swelled with satisfaction. “Of course. That weapon should never have existed. A vile artifact of the new humans, and it has no purpose in this world anymore. Is this what you flesh-beings call feeling refreshed?”
Well, I guess if you’re in a better mood, that’s all that matters.
Still, humans had made that? It was revolting.
In any case, the thing was done, and no one had seen us do it. All as planned. We started to head back inside.
At that moment, Miss Hertrude stepped out from the opposite end of the deck. “There you are.”
“Did you need something? Hey, where are your escorts?”
She ignored my question. “I was hoping to speak with you alone. I wanted to revisit our conversation about that item you found. I hope you’ve been considering my offer. I assure you, I’m willing to pay the appropriate price.”
Wow, she really did want that thing, huh? I made a face. “You sure it’s really worth that much? Looked like junk to me.”
“I see you don’t understand its value. All the more reason to sell it to me. Or you can offer it as tribute to the kingdom, if you prefer. Then I can have one of our officials negotiate for it instead.”
Yeah, about that…
“Well, this is unfortunate,” Luxion said as if the situation had absolutely nothing to do with him.
Are you really going to feign ignorance here?!
“Sorry,” I said. “I dropped it.”
Miss Hertrude’s jaw fell open. For multiple seconds she said nothing.
“Just how stupid are you?!” she shrieked.
“I mean, come on. It was gross!”
“That’s not the problem here! You idiot! You moron! You absolute buffoon! I cannot believe you! You’re telling me you just *dropped* an irreplaceable treasure like that? I demand you immediately change course and retrieve it!”
“No,” said Luxion.
She trembled with anger. “I—I’ll be reporting this to the kingdom’s top nobles!”

“And what purpose would that serve?” Luxion asked. “My master found the treasure, so he owned the rights to it. Whining about it would only make yourself look foolish.”
Not to mention Luxion had turned it into so much dust. There was nothing to retrieve in the first place.
“That was *valuable*! If you can’t treat it as such, you have no right to call yourself an adventurer. What are they even teaching you at that academy?!”
“I hate to break this to you, but the academy basically only exists so we can find marriage partners,” I said.
“Too bad for you, Princess,” Luxion said, even colder than usual.
Miss Hertrude spun, her hair whipping through the air as she stomped back inside. “I won’t forget this!”
I stared after her until she disappeared. “She’s intriguing. I thought she was just your standard, coldhearted beauty, but she’s a lot more emotional than I expected.”
“So now you want her, too? She is far from your type. Particularly in terms of bust size.”
“Do you seriously think I only judge people on the size of their breasts?”
“Yes.”
The way he answered without even a pause pissed me off.

***

When we returned to the capital, I hastily prepared to visit the palace.
Luxion watched me as I changed. “We just got back and you’re off to deliver your report? You *do* have it rough.”
I grumbled, “I’m still only a student. Why do I have a job like this?”
“But aren’t you mentally a full-grown adult?”
“I’m still a kid at heart. I haven’t lost my playful side.”
“I thought you said before that you were mature?”
I shrugged. “I dunno. Did I really say that?”
“You did. I haven’t forgotten.”
“You sure are persistent. Listen, part of being an adult is having a selective memory.”
“Running from reality, you mean,” he said. “I suggest you try some self-improvement instead.”
“I’ll pass. Let’s go.”
“If we must.”
Luxion floated along behind me as we slipped out of my room.

***

I was dead tired as I shuffled down a corridor in the palace, having finished my report. Glancing out a nearby window, I realized it was getting dark outside. “It’s already evening.”

“Having tea with those girls took up more of your time than the actual report,” Luxion remarked.
Much to my chagrin, a surprise tea party had been waiting for me at the palace with several graduating female students, the daughters of prominent noblemen. The report itself had only taken ten minutes, but the party had dragged on for hours.
“It wasn’t the least bit fun,” I said.
“I’m sure it wasn’t.”
They were all ladies from baron, viscount, or earl families. The problem was they’d all come with their demi-human servants, and the only thing they wanted to know about *me* were my financial prospects. Was this what it felt like attending a mixer in Japan and having girls ask about your annual salary?
It made my head pound.
As I dragged my feet down the empty corridor, I stumbled across Queen Mylene wearing a particularly beautiful dress. Her platinum blonde hair practically sparkled, the kindness in her eyes was soothing, and her smile was infectious.
“Oh, Viscount Bartfort, you look exhausted.”
A maid lingered a few steps behind her, poker-faced.
I straightened my back and buttoned my collar to appear more proper. “My apologies. Your Majesty is—”
“Could you spare a few moments for me?”
Now she was the one inviting me along to talk to her. My heart swelled with delight. “I would love to!”
She smiled, and I eagerly followed behind her.
“You really are an open book,” Luxion mumbled from behind me.

***

The queen and I retreated to a room where we sat across from one another. The servants provided tea, which was more delicious than anything I had ever made. It wasn’t the tea leaves that made the difference either. Whoever had made it was skilled.
I sulked a bit in self-defeat—I wanted that skill!—as I waited for Queen Mylene to speak. Luxion hid quietly beside me.
“Are you getting along well with Princess Hertrude?” she asked at last. “I felt a bit anxious when I heard you took her on your adventure.”
“She insisted on coming along. But I thought she had approval?”
Her Majesty’s expression clouded over. Apparently, she hadn’t wanted to grant Miss Hertrude permission for the trip. “Those at the palace have differing opinions. Personally, I didn’t think it appropriate to have her study abroad here in the first place.”
So someone else had approved the trip despite Queen Mylene’s opposition. It was no wonder why she worried; the princess of an enemy state was

attending the same academy as her son. Of course, there was also concern for Miss Hertrude's safety. From the queen's standpoint, sending a princess out on an adventure posed too much risk.
I agreed. If some idiot got crazy ideas in their head and attacked Miss Hertrude, it would be an international scandal.
For that reason, as long as Miss Hertrude was at the academy, the palace had assigned her a retinue of female knights and student escorts. Even then there was still cause for concern.
"I spoke with the princess myself," the queen continued. "She didn't state as much openly, but she holds quite the grudge against the kingdom."
Miss Hertrude hadn't even experienced the original conflict between the kingdom and principality, but the principality had drilled the grudge into her. I knit brows, at a loss for what to say. I couldn't just casually say, *Well, the kingdom is pretty awful*. This was a complex issue, and I wanted to keep my mouth shut.
That's cowardly, you say? Yeah, so what? I *was* a coward.
While I waited, Queen Mylene went on, "Viscount Bartfort—no, Leon—I don't think the principality is going to give up any time soon."
"I'm sure you're right." Pent-up resentment like that didn't just disappear.
"I know being appointed commander to the Saint's personal guard was a burden on you as well. By the way, have you heard about what happened with Lafan House?"
I shook my head.
Her Majesty put a hand to her cheek, brows knitted with concern. "Julius and his friends managed to resolve outstanding loans, but Lafan House's debt—or rather, the Saint's debt—only increased. Normally, we would strip a noble house of its titles for this behavior, but because she's the Saint, many nobles are opposed to taking such a course of action."
Maybe Marie really is cursed. Just when they'd managed to resolve her debt, it increased again. Marie would probably faint when she heard. I would love to see the despair on her face. I'd get a good laugh out of that.
"The palace and temple resolved the balance for her, but that brings up a few issues with next year's budget."
In other words, the money Marie could use as the Saint was going to be cut dramatically. The debt her family accrued must have been substantial.
Oh man, just listening to this makes the tea taste even sweeter. Queen Mylene was giving me the best tea in the world—both literally and figuratively. I was definitely going to sleep well tonight.
"Now, this is where the true issue lies," Her Majesty said. "Leon, you are the commander of her personal guard. The nobles want you to take responsibility for this problem."
"Huh?"
"Even though you were only recently assigned to that position, many of those in the palace and temple insist we can't let the matter slide without censuring you."

This isn't sounding good. How in the world did they think I was responsible for her financial business?
"H-hold on. Blaming me for her spending after you guys saddled me with bodyguarding her seems a little messed up."
"Yes, I know, but I'm afraid people always want to blame someone."
Great, what a rotten time for this world to resemble my original one.
"There are those that begrudge you for how quickly you have moved up the social ladder. I cannot sit idly by as they chastise you, however. I backed your ascension to viscount. I'll do as much as I can to support you."
"Thank you, I appreciate—hold up. *You* backed me?"
"Yes, that's right. Remember the incident with the pirates? Brad and Greg came to me and said that in truth you dealt with them. Plus, there was the incident with the principality. That was why I recommended your promotion." Her smile was so bright it was blinding.
N-no, that's not what I should be focusing on here! I never wanted to climb the social ladder! "Um, you see, I didn't exactly want a grander title. What I want is…"
"Yes?" She tilted her head, shining like a goddess.
I know she's older than me, but she's so cute! And hey, I might actually be older than her, mentally. Augh, she's making me feel light-headed!
It might hurt her feelings if I told the truth about not wanting the status she'd won me—and then she might regret having done it. I couldn't bear to make her sad. So I blurted out the only thing I could think of.
"I want you."
"W-wait! Y-y-you can't say that! I mean, I'm old enough to be your mother!"
So like a twenty-year age gap? Still within an acceptable range as far as I was concerned! Besides, she was far better than those academy girls. They'd only started kissing up to me because my status changed. Queen Mylene was different—perfect, even!
I reached over, covering her hands with mine. "Even so, I—"
"Ahem." One of Queen Mylene's maids coughed.
Crap. I let myself get carried away again. I completely forgot we were at the palace.
Her Majesty's face was bright red. Dammit, I loved the way she reacted. It made me want to tease her more.
"See, you're making fun of me again," she said. "That's a bad habit, Leon."
If only she weren't the queen, then I really would gun for her.
"In any case," Her Majesty said, bringing us back to the task at hand, "there is something else about the princess that's been weighing on my mind."

***

As soon as they received word that Leon had left for the palace, three demi-human servants gathered at the academy. One of them was Miauler, a tall,

muscular man with cat ears who belonged to Leon's older sister, Jenna. He and his comrades hovered in front of Leon's room.
"Kyle, that traitor. I can't believe he said he wouldn't help us," Miauler snarled.
The other two tried to placate him.
"He's the Saint's servant. We can't make him do something like this anyway."
"The elves were acting all weird. Maybe that's why? Anyway, I'm surprised you got hold of a key."
"You mean this?" Miauler held up the object in question, grinning. "I made a mold during one of the many times that stupid woman dragged me here. Brainless chicks like her are easy to manipulate."
Slaves like Miauler were purely bound by contract. They didn't serve their mistresses out of any sense of love or admiration.
He unlocked the door and carefully scanned the hall before he slipped inside. One of the servants stayed behind to act as a lookout while Miauler and his other buddy stowed some items inside Leon's room.
"What are they gonna do with these things anyway?"
"How should I know? They just said they'd pay me to leave them in this scumbag's room."
The servants at the school hated Leon, mainly because he'd defeated their peers who had tried to go after Queen Mylene during the school festival. His actions had been just, but it had still left a bad impression on the academy servants.
Once they were done, they ducked out of the room and took off. A few male students saw them and thought it odd for servants to be hanging around the boys' dorm without their mistresses, but no one dared reprimand them for it.

***

After school the following day, I threw a tea party. If male students didn't do this occasionally, the girls started all sorts of ugly rumors. Not that I really cared about my reputation right now, but tea parties—or rather, tea itself—was my hobby these days. A fitting one, too, for a gentleman like me.
Today's guests were a real couple of characters. First, Deirdre Fou Roseblade, an earl's daughter with blonde, drill-shaped curls. Her appearance, especially with that red lipstick, suggested she was headstrong and haughty, but she actually had quite the entertaining personality.
"You sure are being awfully carefree," she grumbled.
I sipped the tea I had poured for myself. "I'm satisfied with the taste today."
The offhanded comment irritated my other guest—Clarice Fia Atlee, Jilk's former fiancée. "Leon, you're walking a fine line. Do you understand? Duke Redgrave's faction is losing power. His words don't have much sway at

court, not anymore. Marquess Frampton is on the rise, and he's insisting the nobles take a strong stance against you."
Apparently, this marquess was the one who wanted me to take responsibility for Marie's debt. The notion was so absurd I could only laugh.
"If you're talking about the Lafan situation, it's got nothing to do with me. Marie—or rather, her family—is entirely responsible."
Deirdre uncrossed and recrossed her legs, leaning forward to plant her elbows on the table. "You fool. However they preface it is irrelevant. They're trying to take you down. And they want to take your airship while they're at it. They'll come up with whatever justification they need to get their way."
"I'm shaking in my boots."
The nobles sure seemed to have a lot of free time to waste. I understood why they were so desperate to steal Luxion away, but they'd picked the wrong people to team up with to accomplish that.
"From what I've heard, Marquess Frampton has been meeting with Princess Hertrude. And the kingdom has only been so soft on the principality because Marquess Frampton's faction holds most of the power." Deirdre wore a grave expression as she scrutinized my face, waiting for some kind of reaction. She didn't just coast on her status; she knew everything that happened at court.
Being the daughter of a court noble, Clarice was even more informed. "He's influential enough to get his way even in the face of opposition. Leon, you need to be careful."
It sounded like a troublesome situation over there, but I had no desire to get involved. That had always been my stance, and I wasn't changing it now.
"Great, then they can just strip me of my titles and be done with it."
Deirdre grinned. "You really are a fool. Do you think they'd be kind enough to stop there? If you're not careful, they'll trip you up before you know it, and—"
A flurry of footsteps suddenly drowned her out. Dozens of soldiers flooded into the tearoom, weapons drawn.
"Leon Fou Bartfort? You're coming with us."
Clarice shot up out of her chair, bristling. "What disrespect is this? He's a viscount of lower-fourth rank!"
One the soldiers grinned. "Titles don't matter with traitors. Now come with us, brat!"
To my shock, the soldiers grabbed my arms and hauled me out of the room.
"Traitor?! He's a hero!" Deirdre bellowed after us.
"Hero? He's no hero. He had a secret arrangement with the principality. Now, if you'll excuse us," the knight said grimly as he shut the door in her face.
A secret agreement with the principality? I thought in a daze. What in the world is this about?

***

At the girls' dormitory, Angie rushed into Hertrude's room, pausing only to gasp for air.

Hertrude gazed at her coldly, seated with her legs crossed and her hands folded neatly over one knee. "You sure do seem to be in a panic. I'll forgive your lack of etiquette this time."

Angie glared at her. "What's the meaning of this?"

Hertrude smiled. "Hmm? Whatever do you mean? Speak plainly."

"Playing stupid? You must be the one who started the rumor about Leon and the principality!"

"Angelica, it's not very nice to accuse someone, especially when you lack any proof."

Angie took in a deep breath and exhaled, composing herself. "You seem to be close to Marquess Frampton. Why go to such lengths to drive Leon into a corner?"

Hertrude's voice held a note of pity. "You really came here over something as petty as that? You're as hotheaded as they say. Frankly, you've outdone yourself and become a straight-up fool."

Angie pressed closer. "Do you really mean to go to war with us? What can you hope to accomplish when Leon alone was enough to defeat you?"

The princess smiled triumphantly. "You sure do like putting Mr. Hero on a pedestal. I haven't spent long with him, but I *have* seen enough of the viscount to form my opinion. He's average at best—most of the time. Perhaps he has some promise, but as a knight, he's worse than mediocre."

She laughed when Angie's brows twitched in anger. "Can you honestly disagree? Certainly, a kindhearted knight is the ideal, but in times of war, a knight who can't kill is worthless. He'll never be a match for Vandel."

Hertrude had indeed been watching Leon closely. And she had found him wanting.

"I know he has those Lost Items," she went on. "That familiar of his has some manner of connection to them, too, doesn't it? But that thing only follows Leon's orders. No matter how spectacular the weapon, it is wasted in the hands of a man who won't use it."

Angie couldn't defend Leon on this count. No matter how talented he was, he was still inexperienced as a knight. War was the way of this world, and any knight who couldn't kill wasn't really a man, at least not as far as society was concerned.

"Do you hate us that much?" Angie asked.

All signs of mirth disappeared from Hertrude's face. "What would you know? Can you understand how our people feel, having lost their parents—their children? Your army attacked us without mercy. Don't expect us to forgive and forget!"

“It must be nice to be so ignorant,” Angie snapped. “It seems *you* are the one who knows absolutely nothing. The kingdom was right to make you study here. What you need is—”
The door to the room swung open, cutting Angie off as several female knights charged in. “Stop right there! Lady Angelica, please come with us.”
They surrounded her.
“What? What are you all doing?” Angie looked at them quizzically.
The women grinned.
“How inappropriate of you, trying to get violent with Princess Hertrude.”
“Not very proper for a duke’s daughter.”
“Now, come along with us.”
That was when Angie understood. The female knights who had supposedly been assigned to keep watch over Hertrude were no bodyguards—they were enemies. She tore her gaze from them to stare at Hertrude. “Are you really serious about this?”
Hertrude stood, leaning in close to whisper in Angie’s ear. “This time Holfort Kingdom will be the one flowing with rivers of blood. As for this continent…we’ll sink the whole thing. If you can stop us, go ahead and try, Angelica.”

***

I stared at my room, now a chaotic mess after the soldiers had finished searching. My face soured when they unearthed a letter that supposedly linked me to the principality. I had never seen the thing before, but they had produced quite a number of them as they raided my room.
The enemy had gone to such theatrical lengths that it was actually impressive.
The knight from before marched up to me and smoothed out one of the letters. “You won’t be able to weasel your way out of this anymore. Who knew our hero was actually consorting with a hostile nation behind our backs?”
The lies were so brazen, I rolled my eyes.
“You ready for what’s going to happen now?” He pressed his face in close.
I snorted. “Yeah, you’ve done a great job cornering me.”
He grinned and threw a punch at my face. As I collapsed, his subordinates rushed toward me.
“Don’t try to resist, traitor!”
I didn’t try to defend myself, yet he continued to punch me. Luxion stared down at me from where he hid, and I managed to reassure him with a thumbs-up until they restrained me again.
Honestly, I was starting to have a bad feeling about this.
“How does it feel, clawing your way up the social ladder only to lose it all instantly?”
“I thought this guy was fishy. No punk like you should be a viscount.”

“Seems like he had his hand in all manner of criminal endeavors. Better be ready for a tough interrogation.”
They dragged me out of the room. Male students had gathered in the hallway to see what was going on. Among them was Miauler, my sister’s personal servant. He gave me a sinister smile when he saw me.
“You bastard,” I growled.
At this, his grin widened.
Someone’s foot slammed into me from behind, sending me to the floor. They snatched a fistful of my hair and yanked me back up. I was forced to continue walking, and we started passing female students and their servants.
“Why, this is a pleasant sight.”
“I knew he was suspicious!”
“I had my doubts from the start.”
The girls paused in the corridors as we walked by, spewing hateful remarks without a lick of self-restraint. Some even threw garbage at me.
Oh, come on, seriously? You guys are switching allegiances again?
They had done an entire circuit by this point, returning to their original stance on me. Strangely enough, I found it more comfortable that way.
The knight who’d kicked me sneered. “Viscount Leon Fou Bartfort—no, I guess you’re just Leon now. I hope you’re prepared for what comes next, you filthy criminal.”
I mean, yeah. First come the false accusations, then comes the cell. Duh.
“This isn’t exactly how I envisioned you taking my titles away,” I joked.
Then the crowd split to reveal Livia.
“Leon!”
I gave her a small wave and kept going as people continued slinging trash at me.
Clarice and Deirdre also appeared then, along with my friends, Daniel and Raymond. They watched with fear in their eyes as I was escorted out of the academy.
This stupid otome game world is the absolute worst.

Chapter 4:
Behind the Scenes

TOGETHER, Hertrude and Marquess Frampton paid a visit to the palace's vault, home to a number of treasures and Lost Items. Many ancient tools whose functions remained unknown were also on display. Hertrude froze when she spotted a certain item.

I found it, she thought. I heard one was here in the kingdom's vault, but to think they've turned it into a mere decoration. This marquess really is a buffoon.

"Marquess, might I convince you to hand this piece over to us?"

He stroked his beard. "This? It's quite a precious artifact. I'm afraid I would have to consult the other nobles before making such a decision."

The right arm of an ancient Armor sat in a glass case, black and spiked. It certainly did have historical value. However, the kingdom clearly didn't see any modern purpose for it. Marquess Frampton put on an air to gain the upper hand in negotiation, but he couldn't even begin to guess Hertrude's true thoughts.

I can't believe they left something so dangerous lying around. The kingdom is beyond salvation. Even if we don't use it, it would still be safer in our hands.

"What would you wish in exchange?" Hertrude asked, crossing her arms.

He smiled. "Ho ho ho, it seems you've taken quite the liking to the piece. Won't you tell me what you would do with it?"

Hertrude glanced over the treasures in the room. Her eyes lingered on the Magic Flute. Next, she eyed Vandel's beloved sword, massive and imposing, its size intended for use by a powered suit. Forged from a unique metal, it was especially valuable. Seeing it lying useless in the kingdom's vault vexed her greatly.

"You took our other treasures already. Can't it be compensation?"

"We stole nothing from you. We won your flute and sword in honorable combat."

Strictly speaking, Leon had done the taking, and he had offered both items as tribute to the kingdom.

Marquess Frampton sobered then, realizing evasive responses wouldn't deter the princess. "Your Highness, do you truly desire this artifact?"

"I do."

"For what purpose?"

"It's an ancient Armor fragment, yes? I have a historical interest. And it has an ornamental charm, I suppose."

"Indeed."

Hertrude had been nervous, afraid her insistence would make the marquess suspect her—but he dropped the subject, seemingly satisfied.

“Now, while we’re at it, I would like to revisit the matter of renewing ties between our states,” he said.
“The principality wishes this,” said Hertrude, though her words lacked inflection.
The marquess noticed, but he continued nonetheless. “To that end, I’d like to send Prince Julius to the principality, to act as a bridge between our countries.”
“He’s the Saint’s lover, isn’t he?”
“Embarrassing as it is to admit, yes. I wish Prince Julius possessed the same level of self-awareness as yourself, Your Highness.” The marquess paused. “Allow me to get to the heart of my proposal. We’re prepared to cede some of our territory to the principality. Although to do so, the kingdom will need some ‘cleaning out,’ as it were.”
For once, he had fully captured Hertrude’s interest. “Tell me more.”
“Your family was once a branch of Holfort royalty. We’d like to use this opportunity to forge a *real* alliance between our countries. I believe we can work together, don’t you?”
He wanted cooperation—but for what?
“How absurd,” Hertrude replied curtly. “You expect us to lay down our weapons for the sake of an insignificant sliver of land? What proof do I have that you intend to honor this offer?”
The marquess smiled. “Princess Hertrude, you seem unaware of the kingdom’s circumstances. Ceding this land would not trouble us.”
“What circumstances?”
“The land between our nations, where we conduct our wars, is not under direct control of the kingdom.”
Regional lords owned the floating islands that separated Holfort and Fanoss. Strictly speaking, those territories didn’t belong to the royal family.
“I suppose that’s true,” she said. “I believe it’s Earl Field who reigns over the island nearest our border. He is of your kingdom’s nobility, is he not? How do you propose to cede the territory of your peer?”
Brad Fou Field, one of Marie’s lovers, hailed from Field House, which served the important role of keeping the principality in check. They couldn’t just hand that border guard over. And yet…
“Their ability to resist the principality relies entirely on the kingdom’s support,” the marquess continued. “Don’t tell me your nation’s military couldn’t handle weaklings left to their own devices?”
“You joke. Our military is perfectly capable. But what merit is there for you in this betrayal?” Hertrude shot back.
Marquess Frampton gave her a toothy grin, his eyes gleaming. “Well, Princess, those regional lords are, in truth, a hindrance.”
“A hindrance, hmm?”
That’s right, Marquess Frampton and Earl Field support different political factions. The complexity of the kingdom’s domestic politics confounded Hertrude, but she was willing to take advantage. “All right. I accept your

deal. And since you propose Prince Julius marry into the principality, I'll take that as his engagement gift."
She pointed to the black, spiky Armor fragment.
Marquess Frampton nodded. "A splendid arrangement, if I do say so myself. Let me know when the principality is prepared. We'll clean out the kingdom, and once Fanoss has won the territory we promised, we'll intervene and call a truce. I think that's the best course of action."
"Very well. I swear, as princess of the principality, that we will honor this agreement."
This fool is grinning as if he thinks he's sealed an incredible deal. You think I'm dancing in the palm of your hands, but the joke's on you. Hertrude suppressed the urge to smile, relieved for the first time since her defeat. I need to hurry and get this back to the principality.
She glanced briefly at the Magic Flute also on display. Rauda, my little sister…I won't blame you if you resent me for my foolishness.
Hertrude bit her lip before turning her attention to her next objective. "By the way, how are things going in regard to the issue with Viscount Bartfort? Have you retrieved his Lost Item?"
The marquess's smile faded then. "Yes, both the airship and that impressive Armor. I'm sure we'll finish analyzing them soon. As for that brat, I hoped to have him executed by now, but he is the queen's favorite at present. We're running into a bit of trouble on that front."
Hertrude's smile only grew. Holfort Kingdom had rendered their greatest weapon useless. How perfect to have Viscount Bartfort out of the picture. Given the behavior of his familiar, I doubt the marquess or his men will be able to assume control of either Lost Item.
"I see. I suppose it will be nothing but tranquility here in the kingdom from now on. Will I be calling you prime minister someday soon as well?"
The marquess grinned. "Oh, no, no. Me, prime minister? That's absurd."
Liar. That's what you wanted from the beginning. You went through a lot of trouble to force House Redgrave out of the running. But thanks to all your efforts, I've won. I owe you my thanks, you ambitious fool.
"I would like to send a letter to the principality as soon as possible," said Hertrude. "Could I trouble you to prepare an airship to carry it?"
"Certainly, at once."

***

When the promised airship arrived, hovering over the principality, the former knight Vandel Him Zenden boarded. A large scar extended from his forehead to the top of his skull, and his body bulged with muscles and sinew; he didn't look nearly as old as he was. He accepted the item the crew brought him without knowing what it was. An Armor fragment, yes, but he'd never seen anything like it before. And it was only a right arm—what good was that?

“This came from the princess?”
“Yes. She said it was very valuable.”
“Don’t tell me… Is this thing actually a Lost Item?”
“So it appears. She wrote that she found it in the kingdom’s vault.”
Vandel wasn’t the only one aboard the ship. Gelatt, an earl who’d once acted as an emissary between the kingdom and the principality, accompanied him.
Gelatt stroked his naked upper lip, a habit he’d developed in the wake of losing his beloved mustache. His eyes burned with the desire for revenge. “I do wish she’d sent something more useful. That Fiendish Knight still hasn’t been executed, has he?”
Fiendish Knight was what the principality had come to call Leon, as his actions were so far removed from the ideals of a true knight. He had refused to kill any of the principality combatants, and they had returned home in disgrace to be ruthlessly disparaged by nobles and commoners alike.
It was just as Leon had said; people treated Vandel as if he was too old to fight anymore. He’d lost his title as the Black Knight.
“I won’t allow you to disrespect the princess.” Vandel glared at the earl. Old as he was, he was as imposing as ever.
Gelatt averted his eyes, scanning over the letter instead. “Th-that wasn’t my intent—hmm?” His eyes flew open, and his gaze flitted back and forth between the letter and the spiky black Armor fragment. “It can’t be…”
“What?” Vandel crossed his arms.
Gelatt’s voice was filled with glee. “Black Knight—no, *former* Black Knight—are you prepared to throw your life away?”
Vandel snorted. “I’m just a senile old man now—my life has no meaning without knighthood. So if it means saving the princess, I will do whatever’s necessary.”
“Excellent! Allow me to explain. This Armor fragment is from an ancient suit—no, ancient doesn’t even begin to describe how many years ago it was developed. It’s from the time of legends. Even among royalty, only a select few know anything about this Lost Item.”
Everyone present turned their gaze to the Armor fragment.
Gelatt threw his arms wide. “What an incredible gift! Princess Hertrude has done more than enough to fulfill her role. Not a soul can pose a threat to Princess Hertrauda now! When next we meet, that Fiendish Knight’s life will be forfeit!”
“You’re saying I’ll be able to fight him with this?”
“Theoretically, yes, if he ever gets out—he’s been framed by his own people and imprisoned. Ah, what a sweet turn of events.”
Vandel frowned. “It’s a shame I won’t be able to settle this in battle.”
“I struggle to understand you military types. More importantly, thanks to this, no one can stand against Princess Hertrauda anymore.”

Hertrauda Sera Fanoss was the second princess and Hertrude's younger sister. She was the principality's ace in the hole, stationed in Fanoss's skies with an armada and a second horde of monsters at her command. The size of their force blotted out the sky.
Vandel narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing the Armor fragment. "I *will* save Princess Hertrude, even if it costs me my life." He curled his hand into a tight fist.
Beside him, Gelatt was equally triumphant. His missing mustache had at last been avenged.

***

It was damp and chilly in the cells beneath the palace. The air was stagnant, too. It wasn't a place you would want to be for long.
My hands were cuffed to maintain the appearance of captivity. As I yawned, the jailer gave me the signal that a guest had arrived.
The moment Prince Julius appeared, he began hurling insults. "I misjudged you, Bartfort!"
This from a man who might have been king one day if he hadn't lost the title of crown prince.
I was just as pissed to see him as he was to see me. "Who are you again?"
He went red in the face. "Julius! Julius Rapha Holfort! And what's this I hear about you betraying the kingdom? I had no doubt you were underhanded, but I never thought you'd do something like this!"
When you really thought about it, I did have perfectly good justification for betraying them. *It's you! You, Prince Julius!* Though I supposed it wasn't really his fault so much as the marriage traditions around here… Kind of made me wish I *had* turned traitor.
"I haven't betrayed anyone. It's a false charge. Please, save me, Your Highness," I deadpanned.
The prince shook his head. "Obviously you're still in good spirits if you can crack jokes like that. You're going to tell me everything, Bartfort."
Guess he wasn't here to save me. Well, I wouldn't have helped him either, if our positions had been reversed. He didn't have the authority to have me released anyway.
"Tell you what?"
"You have a terrible attitude for someone in the presence of royalty." He frowned.
"You expect me to have undying loyalty for a country that's wrongly accused me and wants to chop off my head? I don't forget and I don't forgive. Someday, I'll make sure to pay you back tenfold."
He ignored my threats. "The kingdom's knights have taken the *Partner* and Arroganz. Apparently, they can't control them, but that's not the problem."
Seemed like a pretty big problem to me. But Luxion would deal with them, so I wasn't worried. Just irritated.

“There are those pushing for your execution, but there are also those trying to protect you. I’m sure they’re just using you as a pawn in their infighting, but something is strange about all this.”
From my perspective, the palace and its nobles were always strange. Like their insistence on promoting me…over and over and over again. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to me at this point. In fact, I would love to hear anyone defend that as a norm.
“So what?” I asked.
“Bartfort, *why* did you betray us? What are you planning this time?”
How rude. He thought I was scheming, too? He really thought I was so awful? “I already told you it was a false accusation. Someone wanted me in here.”
“What?!”
Why are you acting surprised?! You’re a prince—you live at the palace, right? Use your imagination a little bit! You are way too naive.
“You really thought I betrayed you guys? Come on, if I was going to do that, I’d make sure I didn’t get caught.”
He nodded thoughtfully. “That’s true. Knowing you, you would go about it more discreetly. Though you’d still do it in a way that would infuriate everyone in the end.”
It kinda pissed me off how easily he accepted my explanation. Sure, he had faith in me—faith in me being a rotten jerk!
Prince Julius continued, “I’ve never experienced war before, but the atmosphere in the palace makes it feel like we’re teetering on the edge.”
Why was he consulting me about this anyway? I almost slipped and told him, *Yep, one wrong step and you guys will be locked in a civil war,* but I clamped my mouth shut. That wasn’t the kingdom’s only problem; they were a large nation with numerous enemies. The principality was just one of them. That was what made it so terrifying: with Holfort Kingdom on the brink of destroying itself from within, the Principality of Fanoss seemed poised to make a move.
I have a bad feeling about this.
“I wonder if this is fate correcting its course…” I mumbled. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was some strange greater power working here, trying to force the developments of the game to play out the way they were supposed to.
Prince Julius’s face scrunched in confusion. “Correcting what course? What are you saying, Bartfort?”
“I’m just talking to myself. Anyway, I’m behind bars. What do I know?”
The prince put a hand on his chin as if contemplating.
This was my chance. “Hey, let me out of here.”
“I can’t do that. I don’t have any power right now.”
Useless prince.
Anyway, there was something else I found a bit odd. The Magic Flute was the principality’s biggest weapon, but the kingdom had it now, tightly

locked away. On top of that, the principality was out one princess. How could they make moves now? Maybe fate really was intervening to get the plot back on track.
“This world absolutely sucks.”
This time, Prince Julius let my mumblings go in one ear and out the other. He turned his back and strode out of the dungeon.
If things were going to follow the game’s story from here on out, I had no choice but to run. Even I—or rather, Luxion—couldn’t beat the principality’s ultimate weapon.
Just then Miss Hertrude entered the underground cells. She must have passed Prince Julius on his way out. She handed something to the guard, and he excused himself after exchanging a brief look with me.
“They sure have put you through a lot,” she said.
“And whose fault do you think that is? Are you sure you should be waltzing around the palace like this?”
“You needn’t worry. I have permission. And I didn’t order your arrest, you know. I will admit to requesting it, but the nobles of the kingdom were all too eager to treat you this terribly.”
Yeah, but you still caused it.
As I sulked, the princess wandered closer to the bars. She reminded me of some kind of con artist, waiting until I was at my weakest to pounce. “Shall I have them release you? You would be wise to serve the principality instead. I promise we’ll treat you well. I’ll give you exactly what you want—a safe, peaceful life.”
I froze. She had done her due diligence, sniffing out my true desire. The kingdom was hopeless in comparison. They hadn’t even tried. *Sad, really.*
“Foolish, aren’t they?” she continued. “Underestimating the principality while trying to make a pawn of you. I can hardly stand to watch. They wanted to use me to crush you.”
Both she and Prince Julius were royalty, but there was a huge disparity between them. Miss Hertrude was far more competent.
“Bend the knee to me. I’ll make you my knight. I assure you, you’ll find it far more to your liking than serving a rotting kingdom like this. I will promise no status and no honor, just an ordinary, normal life.” She flashed a smile.
“I must refuse.”
Her smile faded into annoyance. “Is the kingdom really that precious to you? Your family has their own territory, right? I don’t mind if all of them swear fealty to me. They can come with you.”
“It’s a tempting offer, but I have no intention of making deals with someone I don’t trust.”
The principality hated me, too. And I hadn’t forgotten that the princess had stuck me into this situation to begin with.
Luxion slipped out of hiding and joined the conversation. “Wasn’t it you who was terrified of Master and had him locked up? And now that he’s weak,

you’re offering him the hand of salvation? Typical. Did you assume he’d be too distraught to think critically?”
Her gaze turned to my AI companion. “What an ill-mannered familiar, eavesdropping on our conversation.”
“If you truly intended to take Master in and honor your promises, I would cooperate and help convince him to join you,” Luxion said.
“You really are a pest.” She glared at him. “You don’t think I’m being sincere at all.”
Was she confessing it was all a lie? Well, that was sad. It really was a tempting offer. My heart had wavered as I refused her.
Miss Hertrude stepped away from the bars, her voice cold. “You should be proud. We thought of you highly enough to deem you a threat.”
Then she turned her back and left.
I plopped back onto my bed. “She hates me.”
Although was it just my imagination, or had she looked a bit sad as she left?
“She doesn’t hate you,” Luxion said.
“You sure about that?”
“If she truly resented you, she wouldn’t have come. The issue is, even if you did take her offer, the most she could do would be to keep her people from killing you. That’s about it.”
I sighed. “If she’d been more serious about it, I would’ve taken her up on it. What a shame.”
“That’s a lie. You wouldn’t betray the kingdom.”
“I dunno. That would depend on the conditions of her offer.”
“Really?” He was still skeptical. “I digress. Let’s discuss the culprit who planted that fake evidence in your room—Miauler.”
“My sister’s personal servant?”
“You did stoke the slaves’ resentment before. Shall I exterminate him?”
I stared at Luxion in horror. “You know, you’re a little disturbing sometimes. Although…”
“Oh, the guard is back,” he interrupted and promptly hid himself.
“Viscount,” the guard called, “would you prefer coffee or black tea?”
“Black tea, made from some decent tea leaves this time, please.”
The man scratched his head. “Uh, we don’t have expensive tea leaves here.”
I waved a hand. “I suppose I’m still reeling from the shock of becoming a prisoner after being appointed commander of the Saint’s personal guard. What in the world is even going on with my life?”
“You and me both.” He shook his head. “I think this is probably the first time this has happened since the kingdom’s founding.”
Not a record I was happy to be setting.
The guard headed back outside to prepare the tea, and Luxion took the opportunity to slip back out of the shadows. I yawned and removed my cuffs, swinging them around a finger in boredom.
“Aren’t you a bit too relaxed for being in a dungeon?” Luxion asked. “I do wish you would be a bit more guarded.”

“No, thanks, way too exhausting. You know, it’s a good thing I was close with Queen Mylene. It would’ve been no laughing matter if they’d gone straight into torturing me after the arrest.”
“If that happened, I would have rescued you at once and sunk this entire continent. Or perhaps I would have wiped out all of humanity aside from those you’re close to—”
I held up a hand. “Stop. I’m not here for genocide.”
“How benevolent.”
I’d forgotten, but when we first met, Luxion had gone on and on about wanting to obliterate all of the new humans. Truthfully, he was probably more dangerous to this world than most things, but even he couldn’t beat the final boss. He wouldn’t lose to it, necessarily, but he couldn’t *win*. The key to victory was the Saint’s power, Livia’s power, and “love.”
You may be wondering what I was doing locked up in a cell, in that case. To explain, we’ll have to go back to the day when I was first arrested…

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The day I was apprehended, the guards brought me to a room in the palace with two other people.
“Hi, Mister Gilbert. Look at me, I’m in cuffs.”
The two in front of me didn’t even crack a smile.
One of them was Angie’s older brother, the heir to House Redgrave, Gilbert Fou Redgrave. He wore a look of relief. “You’re not even shaken. Seems the nobles were right to consider you a threat. It takes grit to jest in these circumstances. I respect you for that.”
Grit? Nah. Knowing about it beforehand was what had helped me brace myself.
The other person in the room was Queen Mylene. “Leon, about our current situation… The leader of the most powerful faction at present, Marquess Frampton, has made his move.”
As the saying goes, *The nail that sticks out gets hammered down*. There were a lot of people that didn’t look too fondly on someone as young as me moving up in the world so rapidly. The principality was just capitalizing on their jealousy.
“The court isn’t a cohesive unit,” the queen continued. “There are many different factions, and they all move according to their own aims.”
Gilbert nodded. “Indeed. Prince Julius’s fall from power weakened my house’s faction. The power my father lost went to Marquess Frampton, and in a way, Leon, you were the one who caused this.”
“Me?”
“That’s not all,” the queen said. “You drove off the principality’s fleet with just one ship. That put a number of the peerage on edge. The marquess was wary of you, and the principality resented you for what you did. I see why they allied with each other.”

So in a way, I'd triggered my own downfall? Well, that's what you call ironic.
"Leon," Her Majesty said, "do you realize what this means? Some in the kingdom are more afraid of you than they are of the principality. Marquess Frampton in particular."
"Huh?" I frowned.
Gilbert sighed in exasperation. "Think about it. You achieved complete victory over some dozen enemy ships. That means you possess at least that much power unto yourself. I know you have no intention of turning against us, but do you think they believe that? Even if they did, do they have any guarantee you wouldn't eventually rebel?"
I supposed Marquess Frampton's faction wasn't wrong to feel that way, but that didn't explain getting in bed with the principality.
"Fanoss may have lost to me, but don't you think the marquess is underestimating them?" I asked.
"Some would think *you* naive for proposing such, but those who remember war understand the threat the principality poses. They may have held their tongues as yet, but they surely feel anxious."
They know they're wasting their time on me, then—go back to freaking out at Marie and your enemy goddamn state! I sighed. "So that's why they decided to have me locked up, huh?"
"Please forgive me, but we're going to go along with sending you straight to the dungeon. It's safer this way."
In other words, locking me up would make the marquess and his faction lower their guard, and my allies would make their moves to counter him. Since Redgrave House's faction was on the decline, they faced an uphill battle. Queen Mylene wasn't much better off.
"The circumstances are different now than they were a few months ago," she said. "Leon, it wouldn't have been surprising if they tried to assassinate you."
A cold sweat beaded across my forehead. "The knights who captured me sure did seem gung ho, but I never thought it would go that far."
"Their hostility was genuine," said Gilbert. "I'm glad we were able to retrieve you before they carried you off."
A chill ran down my spine. I'd been in more danger than I'd realized.
"The palace has taken custody of you," the queen explained. "This is the most we can do right now. The opposing faction isn't our only enemy. A number of other nobles also see you as a threat. Many of them want your Lost Item to take its power for themselves." She said this carefully, as if she were a mother cautioning her child (which made me tremble in excitement, but we'll leave that aside for now).
Gilbert's voice was strained. "Regardless, things are going to get busy from here on out."
Queen Mylene nodded. "We mustn't let fear hang over the palace. If we don't play our cards right, we may find ourselves in a civil war. And if

Princess Hertrude is on the move, that means the principality will also be—and that's a terrifying thought."
No kidding. Marquess Frampton sure was a busy man. And I wouldn't have even bothered with him if he'd left me alone.
There was the problem with Marie as well. For now, it was in my best interest to remain cautious and keep tabs on the situation. "The nobles have to know it's no time to be quarreling with one another," I said.
Queen Mylene frowned. "Unfortunately, Marquess Frampton thinks this the perfect opportunity—a chance to undermine Redgrave House permanently. I'm sure he's willing to take some risks if it means succeeding in his power grab. You were his sacrifice to achieve that end."
Wasn't that kind of cruel, getting me involved in their power struggle?
For as exasperated as Gilbert was, he seemed to understand the marquess. "He wants authority, enough to turn traitor for it."
"It's sickening," the queen said.
I had to ask about something else that had been weighing on me. "Do Angie and the others know I'm under your protection?"
Gilbert shook his head. "No. We can't tell them either. Only a select few know. In fact, my sister went by herself to Princess Hertrude to protest the situation."
"Is she all right?"
"They released her the moment I weighed in, so it's fine. Are you worried about her?"
"Of course I am." Angie was one of a few genuinely good women at the school. Plus, she was my friend. Why wouldn't I worry?
"My, my, my…" Queen Mylene pressed a finger to her lips and grinned.
She's getting the wrong idea, isn't she? Honestly, Her Majesty was far too cute.
Gilbert smiled. "By the way, I have a favor to ask of you."
"Oh yeah? What now?"

***

And there you have it. By being locked up in this dungeon, I was acting as bait. The only people I had lured so far were Prince Julius and Miss Hertrude, but Gilbert looked into every person who came to see me.
"Can you believe all that?" I asked Luxion.
"I did notice some people seemed to be looking into you and your surroundings. I assume they were collecting information. Possibly they planned to assassinate you?"
"What? You noticed people like that? You gotta tell me these things!"
"Don't worry. I wouldn't allow it."
No, seriously, you should've told me. Now I feel like an idiot for acting so carefree this whole time.
"At least say something to me next time it happens," I said.

Luxion bobbed for a moment. “This kingdom sure is fragile.”
“Changing the subject, huh?” I shot him a glare. “But I agree.”
Miss Hertrude’s maneuvers also roused my curiosity. But surely the nobles hadn’t returned the Magic Flute to the principality, right?
“Miss Hertrude is definitely persistent. Or should I say Fanoss is? They’re taking advantage of the domestic conflict to destroy the kingdom to help it destroy itself. What happened to this being a lighthearted otome game? Isn’t this a bit too heavy?”
“Master, under ordinary circumstances, Holfort Kingdom’s twisted system would be infeasible.”
“Why not?”
“It seems designed to purposefully heighten the dissatisfaction of the regional lords. Under these conditions, rebellion would be nigh inevitable.”
I tilted my head. “Really? My house was so weighed down by debt that we didn’t have time to give that a second thought.”
“Master, please stop using your house as a standard for comparison.”
“Okay,” I said, “so what are you thinking?”
“Just as the principality has its own secret weapon, I suspect the kingdom has something up their sleeve as well.”
A trump card, in other words. “Yeah, I’m guessing it’s *that* thing…” I mumbled.
“If you know something, I would appreciate you consulting me about it.”
“Sorry. It’s just that without Livia, the thing shouldn’t be able to move. Anyway, what should our next plan be?”
“First, we can start by annihilating the new humans—”
“Be serious.”
“I was being entirely serious.”
I stared at him. “You know, sometimes you really terrify me. I meant, what should we do if things stay on their current trajectory? Who do you think is going to win this? Redgrave House or Frampton House?”
“The answer to that is obvious. It depends on what you feel like.”

***

Angie headed for her father’s estate in the capital as soon as she was free. When she found the duke waiting for her, she hastily explained what she knew of the situation with Hertrude.
“Revenge? How simpleminded.” He scoffed. “The kingdom certainly seems to suffer from an epidemic of traitors.”
“Father, please, Leon must be released. He’s done nothing wrong!”
Vince narrowed his eyes. “Don’t be a child, Angelica. Treachery is an everyday occurrence in the palace. And even if I used my authority to have him released, he would not have either that airship or his Armor.”
Angie blanched. “Are you saying he’s useless without his Lost Items? He’s worked so hard until now—for *me*.”

Vince snorted. “What of it? He wouldn’t have risen so far without those Lost Items. I recognize his determination. But without the power of those artifacts, what value does he have?”
Angie’s hands tightened into fists as she stared at the ground in frustration. “I owe him. Leon saved me!”
“And I repaid him. Now, return to the academy.”
“I can’t believe you…” Filled with anger, Angie turned on her heel and stormed out of her father’s office.

***

Vince watched his daughter leave and expelled a sigh. “Honestly, if only that girl could be more honest with herself.”
With his audacious little girl gone, he stood from his chair and Gilbert waltzed in.
“Father, I just saw Angie flying down the hall with a terrifying look on her face.”
“I’ll send someone to keep an eye on her, don’t worry. I hate keeping her out of the loop, but who knows what she’d do with the truth? That girl is too emotionally volatile. It would do her good to recognize how she feels once and for all.”
“You raised her to think of our house first and foremost. Of course she’s out of her comfort zone now. She still would be, even if you told her outright that she was free to love whomever she chooses. I think she would understand if you explained the circumstances to her, though.”
Vince chuckled. “It’s a delicate operation, Gilbert. We must let her take the helm in the matter, or we’ll be the ones fielding the trouble. And first, she must identify her feelings. Are they only friends? Or is there more?”
Gilbert nodded slowly. There would be no budging his father. “I’ve looked into those reaching out to the viscount.”
“It seems the marquess’s people have panicked with regard to their lack of progress on the *Partner*. Some of them have theorized the ship might recognize a new master if they kill the current one. They have appealed directly to His Majesty to have Leon executed.”
Vince folded his arms. “Terrified of the viscount, are they? Well, I can’t blame them. He did manage to drive off the principality by himself. Of course they would panic at the thought he might ever turn that power on them.”
“The temple is kicking up a fuss, too,” said Gilbert. “We have a real power struggle on our hands. If this keeps up, civil war may split the kingdom.”
“That only means the inevitable will come to pass,” Vince murmured. “We are responsible for this discontent. It was always going to build and eventually explode. I have made a number of enemies.”
The only question was whether they could still overcome the opposing faction, given the power the marquess had acquired.

“You have made a foolish mistake, Malcom…” Vince raised his head and grinned at his son. “Angie certainly is a superb judge of character, isn’t she?”
Gilbert pursed his lips. Without Angie, Redgrave House would also have been forced to remain on their guard with Leon. Annulling her engagement to Julius had been a serious blow to their family, but now she had brought Leon to their side instead.
“In a way, it was pretty lucky,” said Gilbert. “It’s a good thing we didn’t act rashly and switch our support to the second prince.”
“Indeed. Now, return to our territory and prepare for battle. I’ll stay and manage the situation here.”
Gilbert nodded and hastened out the door.
Vince, meanwhile, made his way for the palace.

***

Panic grew outside the palace as well.
A kingdom warship hovered above the academy. Some knights surveilled the grounds from their Armors, while other knights and soldiers stood guard across campus. The heavy security thickened the air. All the students felt it. Like a prelude to war.
The moment Angie stepped through the gates, she spotted Livia. Livia hurried over to her, and the two grasped each other by the arms.
“Angie! They…they arrested Leon!”
Angie had to hold back her tears. They were surrounded by students out here, and the crowd pressed in. “I know,” she said. “Let’s go inside.”
Angie took Livia by the hand and pulled her toward the girls’ dormitory.
Livia looked terribly anxious, and with good reason. “After they dragged Leon away, Clarice, Deirdre, Leon’s friends—they all left. What in the world is going on?”
“War,” said Angie.
“War?!”
“Quiet. Someone might hear you.”
Once they safely slipped inside Livia’s room, Angie’s shoulders sagged, and she collapsed to her knees. It was only with Livia’s support that she managed to make it to the bed.
“Someone here harbors a connection to the principality,” Angie continued. “They had Leon arrested and thrown into the palace dungeon. The nobility has taken the *Partner* and Arroganz as well.”
Livia gaped. “Th-that can’t be! Leon hasn’t done anything wrong!”
“Doesn’t matter. He’s a hindrance as far as they’re concerned.” Angie hung her head. “If only I had more power… I could have protected him.”
Livia’s face lit up. “Her Majesty! If we ask Queen Mylene—”
Angie shook her head. Mylene had certainly already done everything she could. “She’s helping us as much as she can, but if Leon is still being held,

we must assume someone is obstructing her. Or…she might have already lost standing from trying, and still achieved nothing."
A swift and sudden move like this meant only one thing to Angie. Her visit to her father had confirmed her suspicions. She did like the answer, but that didn't matter.
"Livia, we are about to see a fight, and it will begin in the palace. If the matter escalates, we may well find ourselves in a civil war."
Livia jumped in surprise. "Huh? Wh-why?!"
"Everyone is on high alert. My father and brother are on the move, too. War has all but begun. The only saving grace is blood has yet to be spilled in the royal hall." Angie suspected the airship above the school was a precautionary measure in case the worst came to pass.
In that case, could it be Father or Queen Mylene who sent that ship here?
Her father had told her to return to the academy, so it was logical to assume he deemed it safe.
Livia fidgeted anxiously. "What's going to happen to Leon?"
Angie considered lying to alleviate her friend's fears, but she paused. Livia had fought so hard not to be protected but to be treated with dignity and agency. So, she elected to tell the truth. "I'm sorry. Redgrave House has decided to cut him off. Father believes that without his Lost Items, Leon is worthless. Given Queen Mylene's lack of influence thus far… Worst-case scenario, they may execute him."
Livia's gaze fell. Trembling, she lifted herself off the bed and made for the door.
Angie caught her by the arm. "Where are you going?"
"Angie, I'm sorry. I want to save him. I'll do anything—I don't care what it takes."
"You…"
Tears streamed down Livia's face as she reached for the door.
Angie realized abruptly what her friend was thinking. "Wait. I'll go with you."
And so the two of them left together, to rely on the only person who stood any chance of saving Leon.

***

After Marie was named the Saint, the academy bestowed on her a special room, the largest one in the girls' dormitory. It was fit for a daughter of high nobility, like Angie.
Marie relaxed there on a sofa, her arms crossed over her chest. She gazed at the two girls standing in front of her, thrilled by how deliciously the tables had turned.
"You're asking me to save that background character? Why should I help him?"
Marie's followers snickered.

Undaunted, Angie repeated their request. “We thought, as the Saint, you would be capable of helping him. Please. We ask that you save Leon.”
Livia bowed her head low. “Please! Rescue Leon!”
Marie grinned triumphantly and took a sip of her drink. I was over the moon when I heard they arrested that stupid background character, but I never dreamed these two would come begging me for help. This feels incredible!
Yes, of all people they decided to rely on, it had to be Marie—the Saint.
Even so, I’m under no obligation to help that guy out. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.
Marie hadn’t been the Saint for long; she didn’t yet grasp the inner workings of the temple or how to manipulate it. But she wasn’t going to let this chance slip by. She locked her gaze on the two girls. “Do you remember all the awful things you said to me before?”
Angie stuttered, “Pl-please forgive me for that. I was shortsighted.”
“You got that right! And hey, you over there—dingbat.”
“Y-yes!”
Marie was going to die from pleasure. “Don’t you think there’s a politer way to go about making this kind of request?”
“Politer way? Uh, um…” Livia’s face twisted in confusion.
“I want you two to prostrate yourself before me in public. If you can do that, I’ll consider saving your beloved background character.”
Even as Marie said this, she knew there was no way they would accept these conditions.
Angelica has too much pride. Olivia might do it, but it’s both of them or nothing! Which is fine by me. God, can you believe what a creep I’d look like if they did?

***

Marie instantly regretted ever opening her big mouth.
She stood in the academy’s outer plaza. Angie and Livia crouched on the ground before her.
You have got *to be kidding me.* Cold sweat beaded on Marie’s face.
People crowded around them, forming a circle with Marie and her followers in the middle.
“Look, Lady Marie. They look absolutely pathetic.”
“I can’t believe a duke’s daughter is bowing her head beside a commoner. They’re even pressing their foreheads to the ground.”
“How unsightly.”
The other students laughed.
Beside Marie, Kyle was utterly exasperated. “Are you sure this was a good idea? Even I find it off-putting.”
The game’s protagonist and villainess—Livia and Angie—kowtowed before Marie. Marie had told them to do it, yes, but she had never dreamed they’d

actually take her seriously! Sweat poured down her back. She had a habit of getting carried away, but even she couldn't laugh at this.
Hold on! Seriously, wait a minute! I can't even do what you're asking me to do—that's the only reason I demanded this! There's no way I'm going to be able to actually save that stupid background character!
Angie and Livia had held up their end of the bargain by humiliating themselves in public, but Marie didn't have the first idea how to keep her end.
Laughter roared and echoed. The entire student body delighted to see this unfold.
"I almost want to cry. I can't believe I was one of that girl's followers. So much for noble pride."
"She's doing it for a guy, you know. What does she find so great about Bartfort anyway?"
Angie's former followers whispered amongst themselves. It set a dreadful precedent for someone of her status to bow before a lesser noble. That was precisely why Marie had thought Angie would refuse.
Now Marie's followers were getting riled.
"Come on, you need to properly beg for it!" one of them crowed.
Angie kept her head bowed as she pleaded. "I ask that you save Leon's life."
That just fired them up even more.
"That's not right," one simpered mockingly. "There's a better way to ask, isn't there? As a duke's daughter, you should know better. You need to humble yourself more if you're going to beg for a favor."
Angie clenched her teeth. "Please save Leon's life, L-Lady Marie!"
Marie was speechless. The kowtowing had been one thing, but the manner of address—that was a serious breach of etiquette, wasn't it?
"Commoner, you, too!"
"Please save Leon's life, Lady Marie!"
"You're both so pathetic when you don't have Bartfort to save you. You two just hide behind his back and let him protect you."
Every student, those who were Marie's entourage and those who weren't, cackled.
What the heck? These people are terrifying! They're using this as an excuse to vent, aren't they? I seriously can't believe them.
It was, at least, easier for Marie to ignore her part in instigating this situation if she could instead be disgusted at everyone else's behavior.
And then…
"Lady Marie, this would make a convenient footrest for you." One of Marie's followers pointed to the back of Angie's head.
"What?!"
Her other lackeys joined in.
"Oh, in that case, it would be better for her to use the duke's daughter as a chair and the commoner as a footrest."
"Don't you feel honored, being able to serve as the Saint's chair, Angelica?"

“Hurry up and answer!”
One of the girls tried to kick the back of Angie’s head, and Marie wanted to scream.
What are you morons doing right now?! Are you trying to give me a one-way ticket to a bad end? If that background character learns what I’ve done, he’ll get his revenge—from all of us! H-he’ll roast me alive! Marie could, with crystal clarity, picture Leon with his rifle in hand and a poker face. Her legs wouldn’t stop trembling. Th-that’s right. He’s got a cheat item, doesn’t he? If he got seriously angry…
Just then, help arrived. Julius pushed through the crowd and put out a hand to stop Marie’s followers. “We see how determined they are by now, don’t we? Marie, I don’t see any point in letting this continue.”
“Agreed,” said Brad, coming with him. “That was quite the display. We gotta show ’em we’re just as sincere.”
Jilk nodded. “We’ll let bygones be bygones. Marie, let’s forgive them for what they did.”
The three of them certainly could act full of themselves.
Then Chris joined in. “If we allow them to embarrass themselves any further, it would only stain Marie’s reputation.”
Greg smacked his fist against his palm and grinned at Marie. “They showed some guts. Now it’s time for us to rescue Bartfort.”
This world had no culture of kowtowing to people. As far as they were concerned, this was just an unusual display and more than enough to warrant forgiving the girls.
Leon, on the other hand, knew exactly what it meant, since he had also reincarnated from Japan. If he heard about what had happened here…
Marie quivered with fear. Oh, crap. If I actually tell them I can’t really save him, my life will be over. Wait. Why doesn’t he just save himself? No, seriously. Is he an idiot?
Then she had an *idea*. Turning to her five love interests, she asked as sweetly and hopefully as she could: “Do you mind if I entrust this to you all?”
The five of them turned to her, grinning—and nodded.
At least she had saved herself for now. Marie spun on her heel and left the two girls kneeling on the ground behind, her lackeys trailing after her.
“You’re so generous, Lady Marie.”
“If it were me, I would have trampled them.”
“Oh? If it were me, I would have had them stripped naked and *then* made them apologize.”
Disgusting.
Let’s not think about it for now. Ugh, this seriously isn’t funny. These guys have no idea what they’ve done. What’s wrong with them? This is way different than I pictured.
While the other girls continued to chatter and laugh, Carla lagged behind, utterly quiet.

***

Other students lingered to laugh coldly at Angie and Livia as the two stood.
“I can’t believe you went that far.”
“Redgrave House sure is on the decline. Does she even realize how shameful she’s being?”
“Such a crude girl—consorting with commoners like that.”
The group continued to sneer as they dispersed.
“I would have been fine doing it by myself,” said Livia. “Why did you join me? I mean, your house’s position is at stake.”
Angie smiled sadly. “I thought it the best course of action. I believe I feel guilty—I’ve done my father a disservice. But…I want to save Leon. I really am an idiot.” She gave a strangled laugh and tears welled in her eyes. Yet something about her expression seemed strangely relieved. “I expect he will disown me for this dishonor. I knew it would happen, but—it doesn’t matter.”
Livia could only think of how, not long ago, Angie had been engaged to Julius. Now Angie had lowered her head to the person responsible for the annulment of that engagement and for everything that had followed. It must have been so terribly hard.
So this is how strong her feelings are for…
Livia’s heart seized. She couldn’t imagine she compared.

***

An artificial island floated over the Principality of Fanoss, one that was the flagship of a fleet of more than one hundred fifty airships and a horde of monsters. Together, they blotted out the sky.
Holfort Kingdom had seized Hertrude’s Magic Flute, but they were fools to think it the only one. The principality owned another, and the person who wielded it was the fourteen-year-old second princess, Hertrauda. Her appearance greatly resembled her older sister’s, from her facial features to her silky black hair. Where they differed most was in their skill with the Magic Flute; Hertrauda’s power far surpassed her older sister’s, and she commanded an even greater horde of monsters.
Ideally, Hertrude’s vanguard would have wiped out the kingdom, but Leon had single-handedly quashed their plans, leaving the principality in an uproar. Though they hadn’t planned to send Hertrauda out so soon, Leon had forced their hand.
“The Fiendish Knight won’t even stand against us, will he?” Hertrauda asked.
“Correct,” one of her retainers replied. “The kingdom’s nobles have secured his Lost Items, both the airship and Armor. They are a foolish lot.”
“Princess, the preparations are finished,” a knight reported.

The young girl nodded. The principality was staking its future on this war. “We launch our invasion now. Stand tall, everyone! We make for Holfort Kingdom’s capital. Ignore the mice who dare get underfoot—they are inconsequential. Now, move out!”

Chapter 5:
The Fake Saint

I HAD THE GUARD excuse himself to give me some privacy, and then I sat quietly in the dungeon to reflect on my most recent guests.

All of them had been utterly worthless. They came with requests like, “I’ll pay you, just tell me how to get the *Partner* to move,” or “You can join us, and we can work together.” Crap like that.

Even Luxion was agitated. “These nobles are rather transparent, claiming they’ll spare your life if you hand over the *Partner* and Arroganz. Can’t they try a little harder to be believable?”

“I doubt it. They’ll kill me as soon as I hand anything over. It’s almost impressive how easily they spout such lies.”

That they had the audacity to ask me how to use *my* stolen property really made me question their sanity.

“They attempted to disassemble both but gave up halfway,” Luxion said. “The *Partner* is in quite a pitiful state. Master, are you sure we can’t simply destroy the kingdom?”

“I’m sure.”

“All right, but perhaps we could at least take control and rule as—”

“No thanks.”

Arroganz was safely tucked inside a container that the nobles couldn’t even break through. They had also wrecked the interior of the *Partner*. However, the most important systems were beyond their ability to dismantle, so we were safe there.

“The reason you refuse to give up on the kingdom—is it because of Angelica, Olivia, and Mylene? I suspect Clarice and Deirdre also rank high on your priority list. Do you wish to protect the kingdom because they’re part of the ruling class? If so, I at least recommend reforming this country from the inside.”

Did he think I was doing anything because I liked some of the girls living here? That definitely wasn’t it. And hey, also—“Do you seriously think I want to *defend* this country?”

“Am I incorrect?”

“Let me be clear—I have zero interest in managing a country, let alone leading anything whatsoever. Therefore, I have no right to tear it apart. If I did, I’d ruin the lives of the people living here for no reason.”

“Are you sure about leaving things as they are?” he asked. “If the faction supporting you fails, you face execution. Not that I would ever let them get away with it, but I don’t understand the impulse. Why won’t you do anything yourself?”

“If they try to get rid of me for this, I’ll just make a run for it.”

Fortunately, for now, the kingdom had both Miss Hertrude and the Magic Flute. As long as the principality didn't manage to steal them back, the kingdom didn't have anything to fear on that front. There would be a number of casualties within our borders, but those would be the kingdom's own fault.
"Then why not stand up for the people's sake?" Luxion continued, refusing to drop it.
"No one wants that from me."
In this world, you didn't just gather up a bunch of civilians, stick some spears in their hands, and go to war. If you wanted soldiers, you had to train them properly. Recruitment was difficult too because, by and large, the citizens didn't have much to worry about. That was the one part of our society that fit the picture of a lighthearted otome game. Most of the common folk were pretty satisfied with their lot. Fighting was for knights and soldiers. Sure, discontent existed everywhere, but those with the most to complain about were guys like me, the small fraction of the ruling class locked in the hell of bride hunting.
Ugh, this really is a despicable world.
Simply put, even if you did start a rebellion, few common folk would rally behind you.
"Plus, whatever you might think of me, I *am* a knight."
"You mean someone kind to women who does their country's bidding?"
I shook my head. "Moron, I mean a knight who protects the people."
"You? Isn't that simply a facade?"
"Facade, idealism—whatever you wanna call it, I like that stuff. It's way better than becoming a puppet for the girls at the academy or letting this country work me to the bone. Plus, Livia likes when I say idealistic stuff like that." Angie, on the other hand, would give me a troubled look.
"You're awfully blasé about this. I feel silly for ever having been impressed."
I shrugged. "What were you expecting from me? And what are you trying to make me do, anyway?"
"Oh, I just thought it would be wonderful if the two of us could finally annihilate the new humans together. That's all."
I have no idea how to even begin to respond to that.

***

As my time in captivity slowly passed, another guest came to visit.
Jilk stood in front of my cell, shaking his head. "What a pitiful state you've found yourself in, Viscount Bartfort."
"Come all this way just to be snide?" I asked. "You have a lot of free time."
Jilk puffed out his chest. "I am here at Miss Marie's request. She asked me to save you."
"Marie? Is this some kind of trap?"

“How rude. What kind of tone is that to take, after I came all this way to help you?” Jilk stood straight. “Wait here a while longer. I’ll have you out soon.”
“*You* will?” Did he even have that kind of authority? And why was *Marie* trying to help me? More and more questions followed those, but in the end all I could say was, “And how are you planning to save me?”
“My family is court nobility, after all. I have a number of connections.”
“Yeah, that’s not exactly your power, though, is it? It’s your family’s.”
Jilk huffed. “And what of it? At any rate, save your worries and be patient.”
He spun around and left, but it wasn’t long before he came shuffling back. His hair was an absolute mess, as if he’d gotten into a fight.
“I failed…”
“Yeah, I figured.”
“N-no!” he protested. “I mean, my father just told me to reflect on my actions and wouldn’t even hear me out.”
That’s because you’re constantly getting yourself in trouble.
Jilk ended up leaving the dungeon with his shoulders slumped in defeat. What a worthless jerk.

***

Greg was the next to grace me with his presence. He was in an even sorrier state than Jilk had left in. His clothes were torn and frayed, his cheeks covered in bruises.
“Sorry. When I asked my house to help you out, my dad and I got into it.”
“Did Marie put you up to this, too?” I asked.
“Well, yeah, but I also owe you personally. I figured I could help you out, but my dad just clobbered me, so that’s a no-go.”
Conflicted as I felt about it all, I was happy he’d tried. “Go apologize to your dad. You guys put your families through way too much trouble.”
He stared at me.
“What?” I asked.
“Bartfort, you’re the last person I want to hear that from.”
“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?!”
This jerk! I thought he was halfway decent for a minute there. Some fool I was!

***

My next visitor was Brad. Unlike the previous two, his uniform was in pristine condition, and there were no signs he’d gotten into any fights. However, his hair did appear a bit disheveled, and he was staring at the ground awkwardly.
No matter how long I waited, he wouldn’t say anything, so I finally spoke.
“What, did you come here to save me, too?”

Brad's gaze drifted, looking anywhere but at me. "Th-that was my intention, but I couldn't get in contact with my family."
"Did something happen?"
"My family wasn't at the Field estate in the capital. So…"
Basically, he wanted to help me, but he didn't even have family to rely on.
"Okay," I said. "I get it. Now stop looking like you're about to cry."
"I—I'm not!"
What in the world were these boys even trying to accomplish?

***

The fourth member of their group—Chris—came next.
"Let me guess…you also tried relying on your family to break me out of here, right?" I asked the moment he walked in.
Chris gaped. "H-how did you know? I haven't even said anything yet."
"You and your buddies have trickled in here one after another since this morning, and each one of you failed. I'd have to be a total idiot to not catch on at this point."
"Everyone else already came? Then surely one of us will succeed. I…already failed. I'm sorry, Bartfort." He hung his head.
"Before getting all mopey on me, why don't you do some first aid on those wounds? How did you even get that banged up?"
Greg was pretty bad, but Chris was in a far worse state. Even the lenses on his glasses were cracked.
"When I asked Father for help, he grabbed a wooden sword and started chasing me."
I shook my head. "You've got it rough, too."
"Although, all things considered, I don't think I could expect much politically from my father." Being beaten to a pulp must have cleared Chris's head. "They call him the Sword Saint, but he's little more than a sword instructor. He's not an important figure politically speaking, so I didn't figure he would be able to help you."
"Huh, okay." What did this jerk even come here for?
"He made up all these excuses for why he was refusing me, so I finally asked him, 'What, you mean you're incapable?' And then…"
Uh, yeah, I can see why he got pissed. Are you sure you didn't go to your parents' house just to pick a fight?
"If he couldn't do it, I wished he'd just said as much."
"Did you seriously go to him with that attitude? Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if you guys had any intention of helping me in the first place."

***

Finally, the last of the five idiots swanned in.

Prince Julius waltzed up to my cell, but before he could open his mouth, I cut him off.
“Go home!”
“Wh-why?!” he demanded, flustered. “I haven’t even said anything yet!”
He didn’t have to. “Your cheek tells me all I need to know. You tried to help me but failed, right?”
The prince slumped. “That’s right. I asked Mother to free you from the dungeons, and this happened.” She must have slapped him hard; there was a perfect red outline of a handprint on his cheek.
Wow, Queen Mylene must be pretty fearsome once you piss her off.
Actually, it made me curious. What had he done to incur her wrath? “She slapped you just for that?”
“Yeah. It was so sudden I was shocked. Even more terrifying, she did it without any emotion on her face.”
I stroked my chin. “I can’t imagine someone like her slapping a person out of nowhere.”
“You just don’t know her. She’s terrifying. Still, I have no idea what upset her so much. You’re her favorite. I don’t see why asking her to release you made her hit me.”
Well, the person who put me here in the first place was your mother. But that was top secret. The fact that Queen Mylene hadn’t disclosed the circumstances to Prince Julius was proof she didn’t trust him—at least as far as I was concerned. It almost made me feel sorry for him. But he did have a previous infraction, so I could understand her caution. There was no telling what stupid thing he might do, given the way he’d broken off his engagement to Angie.
“Are you sure you didn’t say anything weird?” I asked.
“I didn’t! Plus, when I first asked her to release you, she looked genuinely conflicted. That’s why I figured if I pushed it enough, she’d cave. So I kept going.”
“Like how?”
“You know that since Marie became the Saint, there’s been official talk of the two of us becoming engaged, yes?”
It felt like a sudden change of topic, but I told him that yes, I had heard. *I have a bad feeling about this.*
“So I told her it would be a favor for Marie, who might one day be her daughter-in-law. I thought this might be a golden opportunity for the two of them to work together and get closer. Then her expression suddenly changed.”
Uh, yeah, I can see why. Of course it would. Did you honestly think she’d be happy to hear that? Are you stupid? No, that’s a silly question. Of course you are. I sighed. “Just go home already.”
“I will for now, but I swear, Bartfort, I *will* save you.” His expression was grim with determination as he turned to leave.
My heart ached for Queen Mylene, having such a moron for a son.

As Prince Julius left, Luxion slipped out from his hiding spot. “What did the five of them even hope to accomplish?”
“They’re idiots. All of them.”
“Do you think you’re any different?”
I grunted. “Don’t put me in the same boat. You’ll piss me off.”
“My apologies. I forgot you were an even bigger idiot.”
“You really do hate me, don’t you?”
No comment on that—just a distraction. “Actually, Master, we have a situation on our hands.”
“A situation?”

***

Marquess Frampton’s faction gathered in a palace assembly room. With the principality’s forces on the move, the marquess’s faction needed to craft a countermeasure.
An anxious noble asked, “Marquess, are you sure this is a good idea? From the reports, the principality’s army includes monsters, and their fleet is enormous. At this rate, an invasion will be a disaster for the regional lords.”
“True, they’re moving faster than we anticipated, but it’s fine. We need only hurry to organize our own forces.”
“Shouldn’t we send whatever troops we can muster?”
The nobles were on tenterhooks imagining the impending tragedy.
Marquess Frampton remained unfazed. “That is unnecessary.”
“What?”
“I made an agreement with the principality to hand over those border territories. A cheap price to pay for quelling their anger and garnering their support.”
“Y-yes, but their fleet is so much larger than we imagined. If we aren’t careful…”
The nobles weren’t the only ones in danger—the common people were, too.
The marquess shook his head. “We must make this sacrifice to consolidate the kingdom’s power. Don’t be alarmed. We have a brand-new ship, that Lost Item. Once we finish analyzing it, we’ll be able to reclaim the land we’ve lost.”
He was, regardless, flippant about the loss of life, which he deemed a necessary evil.
“Let the principality’s forces reign in terror to their heart’s content,” the marquess continued, “at least until our forces arrive. We have agreed that when the battle begins, the principality will back down at the right moment. This will help the kingdom save face.”
A different nobleman spoke up. “Marquess, the temple is insisting the Saint participate in battle.”
“They are a troublesome bunch.”
“The Saint has the ability to neutralize monstrous energies.”

“The Saint’s power, hmm? I’ve heard of it, but can we really rely on it?”
“The temple seemed confident in her abilities. What they’re saying seems to be true.”
Marquess Frampton remained displeased.
Then a noble announced, “They said as long as you let them play the main role in this war, they don’t mind giving up their plan to have Prince Julius reinstated.”
So they intend to strengthen their influence by demonstrating the Saint’s power instead? Marquess Frampton sniffed. “In any case, we should prepare in case the principality refuses to withdraw.”
“Yes. And having the Saint with us will boost morale. Especially because the soldiers are terrified of the rumors that the principality can control monsters…”
“If we can resolve this situation smoothly, my position will be solidified as well,” the marquess said thoughtfully. “Let the temple take the credit and owe me for it later.”
The nobles continued to talk excitedly amongst themselves as invaders wreaked havoc on their borderlands.

***

My days in the dungeon stretched on.
“There have been more tremors as of late,” Luxion noted.
They were faint, but I had felt the rumbling beneath my feet more and more often. “Still, I’ve had visitors basically every day.”
“That simply goes to show you are excellent bait,” said Luxion.
“That doesn’t make me the least bit happy.”
Most were nobles trying to trick me. Despite my refusals, they remained persistent, asking me to hand over Arroganz or teach them how to operate the *Partner*. Sometimes, they threatened me with execution, and other times they tried gentle persuasion—whatever they thought would progress negotiations. It wasn’t limited to the marquess’s faction either. Tons of unaligned nobles had come to try to take advantage of me, too.
However, after days and days of this, Marquess Frampton’s faction were losing their patience.
As I lay on my stiff, uncomfortable bed, Luxion glanced toward my cell door.
“Ah. It seems the kingdom wasn’t able to rise to your expectations, Master.”
I heard the clang of armor and the clamor of footsteps. A number of soldiers were making their way down to my cell. Angie’s daddy and Queen Mylene had failed.
“I guess this is the end, then.”
“You expected too much,” said Luxion.
Well, that was painful to hear.
My guard had just left his seat to change shifts. These armored intruders had perfectly timed their visit.

The leader of their group was a familiar face, a thirty-year-old viscount and a member of Marquess Frampton's faction. In his hand was a battle of alcohol.
"Viscount Bartfort, I brought you a gift. I figured you must be lonely down here."
That liquor was probably spiked with poison.
"I don't drink, at least not yet. You can take it home with you or drink it yourselves," I said.
He smiled mockingly at me. "How long do you plan to keep living like a cockroach? If you're really a noble, you should die bravely."
Bravely, huh? This was my second life, and I planned to die of old age. *So I'll pass, but thanks.* It was still a shame that things had to end this way.
Yeah, okay. It might be time to get out of this dungeon—maybe even the whole kingdom.
As I thought that, Luxion slipped out of the shadows.
The viscount and his men raised their firearms in surprise.
"It's that familiar we heard about! Capture it! If we get our hands on it, that airship is ours!"
"Hypothetically, even if Master did die, I would never obey you," said Luxion. "And you should be more concerned with what's behind you."
More footsteps thundered toward my cell, and Chris came flying through the dungeon entrance, wooden sword in hand.
"Bartfort!" he shouted between thwacks to the viscount's knights. "Are you unharmed?"
Why was he here? No sooner did I wonder that than Jilk charged in, firing his own gun at the viscount.
"You won't be killing Viscount Bartfort today, not on our watch!"
Chris's shot struck true, and the viscount dropped the poison-filled liquor bottle to cradle his wounded hand. The bottle smashed against the floor.
The viscount glowered at Jilk and Chris. "Y-you two… Do you have any idea what you've done? Do you know who's backing me? There's nothing either of you can—"
"Shut up." Luxion slammed his ball-shaped body on the viscount's head, rendering him unconscious.
Jilk used a key to unlock my cell, ushering me out. "Come, we have to hurry!"
I glanced at Luxion, and he moved his eye up and down as if nodding.
I guess that means it's okay to run?
"Why are you guys here?" I asked.
"We did everything we could to get you released without this, but nothing worked. The situation has devolved, so we figured we'd seize the opportunity to break you out."
"I knew it. You guys *are* idiots."
Chris said, "But thankfully, we made it in time. You should be glad."

Brad and Greg were waiting for us at the exit. They were staring down at my cell guard, who'd been tied up.
"You guys are here, too?" I glanced between them. "And what happened to him?" The guard was technically an ally—he'd been assigned by the queen herself.
"He was already like this when we got here."
"Let's move. Julius is waiting for us."
After checking to make sure the guard was uninjured, four-fifths of Team Stupid Jerk and I sneaked into the palace.
Another tremor rippled through the ground.

***

The four of them guided me to a palace courtyard sandwiched on all sides by multiple buildings. Prince Julius promptly slipped out from the shadow of a tree. "I've been waiting for you."
"Why in the world did you have them bring me here?" I demanded. "Shouldn't I be running away?"
Julius puffed up his chest. "There's a secret passage in the palace that only royalty knows about."
"Don't teach me those kinds of secrets! Are you a total moron?"
"Is that any way to talk to me when I'm saving you?" As we quibbled, another tremor ran through the ground, and Prince Julius stumbled. "Oof, this sure has been happening a lot lately."
"Master," Luxion cut in, "we are surrounded."
"What?"
A spotlight shone down on us, illuminating the entire courtyard. It was so bright I had to hold my hand over my eyes, but I heard footsteps echo around us as armored knights flooded the area.
I opened my mouth to give Luxion orders, but—
"Please wait, Prince Julius! We are not your enemy!"
Julius stepped protectively in front of me. "In that case, let us through."
"We can't do that," said the knight. "We came here to rescue Viscount Bartfort."
"Me?" I wasn't sure if I could trust this.
"It will take a couple of minutes to have Arroganz deployed here," Luxion said to me quietly.
Looks like I need to buy some time.
I stepped forward to negotiate when an unexpected figure came toward me. As soon as I realized who he was, I took a knee.
"Father!" Prince Julius lowered his sword.
"Julius, we won't harm him. Everyone, lay down your weapons and come with me."
Prince Julius's father was King Roland Rapha Holfort. His hair and beard were long, gray, and slightly curly. He certainly had the majesty of a king.

“Viscount Bartfort, we have put you through a great deal, but thanks to your sacrifice, we’ve finished cleaning things up on our end.”
Did that mean Angie’s daddy and the rest had won?
“Father, they were about to kill Bartfort!” Prince Julius protested.
His Majesty nodded. “I am aware. And right now, we don’t have time to sit and chat.”
The ground rumbled again, and the king’s gaze fell to his feet. His face clouded over.

***

After I was allowed to change, they guided me to an assembly room. The country’s top brass were already seated, but there were so few of them. His Majesty and Queen Mylene were there as well. And another familiar face—Mr. Vince.
Aha, it’s a gathering of all the people who were supporting me.
“You look well, viscount.”
“Uh, yeah, somehow.” I wanted to make a snide remark, but they were the ones who’d helped me. I reined in my attitude.
As I scanned the room, I realized Prince Julius and the others were missing.
“We have Julius and the others waiting in a separate room,” His Majesty said. “Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say we’ve taken them into custody.”
Hearing that put me on guard.
Queen Mylene explained, “Please don’t get the wrong idea. We’re only doing it to protect them. Just as we did with you.”
“And might I ask why you called me here?”
“We planned to explain.” Mr. Vince acted like that was a given.
“The principality’s fleet has touched down on our mainland,” said Minister Bernard, Clarice’s daddy. “We had ten vessels in the area—reconnaissance and defense forces—but we lost them all. They’ve also shot down nearly a hundred of our Armors.”
The kingdom had the edge in terms of sheer power, but it took time and management to gather their forces and attack when their forces were split across numerous territories. Since the principality was unleashing everything they had in a concentrated onslaught, we were seeing a number of casualties.
“The enemy’s fleet is approximately one hundred and fifty ships. We don’t know how many Armors. According to the reports, the number of monsters they have is beyond counting. Enough to blacken the sky.”
“Miss Hertrude—” I started, but Mr. Vince shook his head.
“We still have possession of the princess and the Magic Flute. The principality must have some other means of pursuing the same tactics. We suspect it has to do with their second princess.”
That was puzzling. “Uh, second princess?”

“Yes,” he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Princess Hertrauda.”
I’d had no idea such a person existed. Hold up, was there *another* Magic Flute? As far as I knew, that wasn’t even part of the game. Now I was so confused I couldn’t collect my thoughts.
“Other countries are also making their move,” His Majesty went on. “The regional lords at our borderlands have requested aid. We’re being attacked from all sides.”
Minister Bernard added, “Our forces at the border are too busy responding to the threat there. They can’t help us. We won’t be able to expect any backup here in the capital.”
“But the capital has its own forces, right? If you scrape together as many people as you can, you’d have quite the number of troops, wouldn’t you?” Weren’t they being too pessimistic?
Queen Mylene shook her head, her voice somber. “A few days ago, the temple requested our help. After conducting a meeting, we deployed reinforcements. We sent two hundred ships.”
The temple had apparently used Marie to demand their right to the ships. They’d made a deal with the marquess’s faction, and as a result…
“They were defeated by the principality’s forces. Only ten ships made it back to us.”

***

A few days earlier, while Julius and his friends were trying to save Leon, some priests had come to see Marie.
“Lady Marie, the time has come for you to show us your saintly power.”
“I guess, if I must,” she said with an exaggerated sigh.
They flattered her so much that she blithely followed them, eventually boarding an extravagant ship. There she found herself draped in the Saint’s regalia, wearing the Holy Necklace and Holy Bracelet, with the Saint’s Staff in her hand.
A chilly wind buffeted her as she stood on the deck.
“Huh…?”
Marie had a number of complaints, chief among them that her hair was turning into a rat’s nest out here. But the first thing to come bursting out of her mouth was: “N-no one told me about this!”
The temple only possessed about thirty ships of their own, but they’d borrowed additional troops from the kingdom, adding two hundred more vessels to their fleet. However, the enemy deployed enormous monsters like they were nothing more than pawns. The sheer quantity of beasts was overwhelming, completely beyond the imagination.
Marie was terrified.
She threw up her staff and screamed at the encroaching monsters, “Don’t come any closer!”

Her staff began to glow, and a large shield encompassed the kingdom's fleet. It hummed with white light, and each monster that touched it disappeared in a puff of smoke.
The priests and knights around Marie showered her with praise.
"This is the Saint's power!"
"We can win this. We can really win this!"
"Ships, charge! Let's force the enemy back!"
Morale soared.
Marie gave a strained smile. Phew, I've actually got this. I was a little worried I couldn't pull it off!
Julius and the other boys weren't with her; the temple had dragged her off at an inopportune time. Even Kyle was absent. The temple had refused to let him ride with her. She was surrounded by temple priests and knights, but she didn't recognize any of them. It made her a little nervous, being alone.
Marie's ship charged forward, and her shield slammed into monster after monster, scattering them into dust. Although she was anxious, she was too drunk with the euphoria of her own power to let it bother her for long.
"That's it," she told herself. "This is simple. I'm the Saint! If you think this is enough to beat me, you're in for a rude awakening!"

***

The principality watched as the kingdom's forces came charging at them, led by the Saint.
Hertrauda was seated at a table peppered with game pieces representing the current battlefield. "It seems the Saint's power is real."
Top officials stood around her, looking on silently.
Hertrauda rose from her seat and took her Magic Flute from a woman standing at her side.
One of the officials said, "Princess, we're already on the kingdom's mainland. I know this isn't what we originally planned, but there should be no issues if we use it now."
"Yes, you're right." Hertrauda's face hardened, her gaze fixed on the flute. She took a single deep breath before holding the mouthpiece to her lips. There was no turning back after this. She was nervous, but she'd already made up her mind—and she began playing.
The melody was eerie yet beautiful. Those around her closed their eyes and listened.
Let's see you try to stop the principality's anger now, Saint.
Above the battlefield, thick clouds appeared, blanketing the sky with darkness. An enormous monster descended from those clouds, its rotund body covered in eyes, its long arms numerous, its skin white and pulsating. It was massive, larger than a small floating island. It was thousands—no, tens of thousands of meters tall.

The creature's sudden appearance clearly unnerved the kingdom's fleet. Hertrauda lifted her lips from the flute and nearly collapsed on the spot. The people around her rushed to her aid, and she laughed. "Now the kingdom will fall."
The officials in the room applauded, some even moved to tears.
"Now the grudge we've held for all these years can finally be appeased."
"That was a splendid display, Your Highness."
"Faced with the Guardian, the kingdom doesn't stand a chance. All that's left is to march our forces into the capital and rescue Princess Hertrude."
Hertrauda insisted on looking outside and, with her attendants assisting her, made her way to the deck.
The creature she'd summoned stretched its arms down from the sky to smash the kingdom's army. It penetrated the Saint's shield and flung one of the enemy's enormous ships through the air. Beams of light poured from its many eyes, setting the vessel aflame.
"We will attack you from the sea and sky, and in the process, we will sink this entire continent." Hertrauda grinned, her face deathly pale. Whether her sickly complexion was a result of exhaustion or fear of what she'd done, none could say.
The principality, it seemed, really did intend to submerge the entirety of the Holfort Kingdom.

***

An enormous palm rushed toward her ship, and Marie cowered with a shriek, dropping her staff. The creature's behemoth of a hand crushed dozens of kingdom vessels.
The priests and knights around her howled in horror.
"Saint, raise your shield!"
"Please, use your power to vanquish that monster!"
"Saint, your staff!"
They were insufferably loud.
"How do you expect me to defeat that thing?!" Marie screamed. "I never knew about this! I didn't know *that* princess was going to appear! Besides, I'm not even the real Saint!"
While everyone gawked at her, another vessel went hurtling overhead. The monster was smashing and burning with the ease of a child playing with their toys.
Marie had no clue what it was, but its unseemly appearance terrified her and left her trembling. Tears welled in her eyes. "Th-there's nothing I can do against a creature like that! Someone save me!"
Other airships tried to defend themselves with cannons, which had no effect. The creature continued its gradual advance, destroying everything in its way—as it headed straight for the capital.
"R-retreat!" a knight bellowed. "Retreat! Fall back immediately!"

Their airship swiftly reversed course, but many allied ships continued to fall, exploding when they hit the ground. The flames spread across the land below.
Marie collapsed on the deck of her ship with her legs curled up to her chest, sobbing. Weeping just as she had that one terrible day so long ago.

***

“And that’s how it happened,” said Queen Mylene, finishing her report.
“It’s been a true nightmare,” said the king.
Mr. Vince was troubled as well. “Even if we did scrape enough people together to fight, we wouldn’t be able to hold our own against a monster like that. And then there are the earthquakes.” He drained his drink, and when he set it down, the cup fell on its side. The vibrations made it roll slowly, as if the table beneath it was slanted.
Ever since the principality had summoned that enormous creature, there had been frequent earthquakes. Was there some connection between the two?
“Viscount Bartfort, I’m going to ask you frankly. Can you win? If you have your Lost Items, can you beat that creature?” asked Minister Bernard.
I gulped. If this creature had the same special traits as the final boss from the game, I had no chance. Even Luxion couldn’t defeat it. Not that he would lose, but he couldn’t win either. You could defeat that monster as many times as you wanted, but it would revive. When I played the game, I had to give up frequently, return to the previous save point, and try again. Honestly, I’d been stuck on that part for a while.
“I have no idea,” I said finally.
This was all personal conjecture anyway. I knew nothing about my opponent, so I had no way of answering definitively.
“I figured you would say that.” Mr. Vince sighed. “But all we can do is rely on you. You’re the only one who can control those Lost Items, and if you can’t defeat it, we’ll have no choice but to use the royal family’s ship.”
Queen Mylene narrowed her eyes. “Duke Redgrave, what are you hoping to accomplish by bringing that up?”
In the game, the royal family’s ship was a vessel that the protagonist and her chosen love interest rode in. It didn’t appear until the latter half of the game, but it was a powerful unit. That said, its performance level fell below Luxion’s. The *Partner* might even be stronger.
The royal family’s ship did possess a unique ability, however.
“If you don’t use it now, when will you?” Mr. Vince groused. “I see no reason to hesitate, given our circumstances.”
“I—” Queen Mylene tried to say something, but the king stopped her.
“Enough, Vince. I understand what you’re getting at, but only those with the right qualifications can even move that ship. Mylene and I can’t do it.”

That was part of the game, too. Only the protagonist and her love interest could move the ship, thanks to the power of love.
Therein lay the problem—Livia shared no relationship with any of the five love interests.
Our only recourse was to use Marie's power. We needed love *and* the Saint's power—which meant we had to have Marie.
"Your Majesty," I said, "I must ask…please let us use the royal family's ship. We'll need Marie and her five lovers as well."
The king frowned. "Do you understand what you're asking? We can't possibly."
Queen Mylene shook her head. "I'm afraid he's right. It's impossible. Leon, we can't lend you the royal family's ship. And as for the Saint, I'm afraid the temple has announced her execution."

***

His Majesty instructed me to move to a separate room while they continued their meeting. They ordered me to remain on standby, promising they would have the *Partner* and Arroganz returned to me.
Well, I am still a knight of the kingdom. If their orders are to wait around, I can do that. There are some things I want to think about anyway. I plopped down in a chair and steepled my fingers.
Luxion floated toward me. "Do you think they'll burn Marie at the stake for lying about being the Saint? Or will they crucify her? The new humans are a loathsome bunch. They're bound to do something pointless when the situation doesn't favor them."
Although the holy items had chosen Marie, she had confessed to being a fraud, so the temple authorities were sentencing her to death. It was such a farce. The temple and Marquess Frampton's faction just wanted someone to blame for the kingdom's failure.
"And they have some gall ordering you to stand by," Luxion continued. "They really think you'll stay faithful to the kingdom and work to protect them? They acted as if returning Arroganz and the *Partner* was some kind of favor! Such a grating attitude. Shall we obliterate them all?"
I shook my head.
"Shame," Luxion mourned.
We were basically headed toward the game's bad end, and I wasn't forgetting that the marquess and his cronies had tried to get me executed. The queen and her allies had managed to stop them, but that didn't change the danger of the situation we now faced. The cherry on top was being turned out of the meeting room just now. As far as I was concerned, Holfort Kingdom had made its bed and could lie in it.
Yet for all my bravado, I hesitated to walk away.
"What are you thinking, Master?"

“Luxion, if you were the one in charge of this situation, do you think you could win?”
“What are the conditions for victory?”
“We can’t let them sink the continent, and we have to defeat the principality’s Giant before it reaches the capital.”
I thought *Giant* was a pretty convenient nickname for a creature I didn’t know anything about other than its size. Though I suspected it was headed toward the capital…just like the final boss in the game.
“Impossible,” Luxion said. “All I can do is buy you more time. My radars indicate there are in fact two of these Giants, one in the sky and one in the sea. They have sandwiched the continent and are heading straight for the capital.”
“Seriously? Two of them? This situation blows.”
Maybe for the one underground we could…blast a hole in the continent? No, that’d probably give us even more problems to deal with. And anyway, realistically, Luxion would only be able to take on one of them, period.
“In that case, if you wish to achieve victory, you must be in a position to oversee all the kingdom’s forces. You also require the royal family’s ship, yes? However, judging by the king and queen’s reaction, giving you control of the ship is tantamount to ceding full authority to you as commander-in-chief. Considering your unpopularity, convincing the kingdom of the need would prove difficult.”
This was completely impossible. We lacked every condition we needed to win this war.
“I recommend fleeing,” said Luxion.
I knew he was right. And honestly, I had no lingering affections for the kingdom. But if I left…
“Oh, it’s your beloved professor.”
A knock fell upon the door and Luxion retreated into the shadows.
“Come in,” I said.
Master, my mentor in all things tea, appeared in the doorway, pushing a tea trolley. “Pardon the intrusion, Mr. Leon.”
“Master…”
He began preparing tea, ever the perfect gentleman. Other nobles and knights of the palace had made a run for it when they heard of the kingdom’s defeat at the border, but Master remained cool and composed. I felt a little calmer myself after sipping some of his tea.
“You seem troubled,” he said at last.
“Ah ha ha, you think so?” I hated myself for waffling back and forth over whether to run or fight. I tried to play it off, but I knew my smile was unnatural.
“Her Majesty informed me of the circumstances. It seems you angered the king, and he dismissed you from his meeting with the nobles.”
The royal family’s ship was a tightly kept secret, and access was strictly controlled. There was probably no good way to ask for it.

“Her Majesty worries about you. You are more talented than I when it comes to capturing a lady’s heart. Perhaps you should be the one teaching me,” he joked.
“Master, are you really not going to flee?”
“I am a knight of the kingdom with a proper title and court ranking. I plan to do what I can. Though the scope of my abilities is quite limited.” He continued to jest, but his answer was clear: he wasn’t going anywhere.
This is it. This is the problem. The people I want to save can’t give up on this lousy place. What would he think if I tried to force him to come with me?
“So you won’t run away with me?” I asked.
“I won’t blame you for running. However, both as a knight and a gentleman, I have made my call. I will remain here.” Master flashed a smile. “Lately, most people think of knights as men who are simply kind to women. But to me, chivalry means protecting those who are dearest, and I refuse to compromise on my principles.”
So, for him, a knight was neither a convenient pawn for the kingdom nor just the ideal otome game love interest.
Master had never appeared in the game; he was a background character, just like me. *And yet he’s so damn cool.*
“Chivalry, huh?”
He nodded. “Might I inquire as to what chivalry means to you, Mr. Leon?”
I drained my cup and stood. “Believe it or not, I love idealism. I agree, a knight is someone who protects the people. Thanks for the tea,” I said. “I’ll be off now.”
“Where to?”
“If we’re going to get out of this situation, I might as well become the commander-in-chief. So I guess I’ll work on convincing the king.”
Master’s eyes widened. I thought he might laugh or be angry, but his expression quickly returned to normal. “In that case, you should rely on Her Majesty. She’s the most accommodating person in the palace. I am sure you’ll find she can help you.”
“More than the king?”
“Quite. However, this is all the assistance I can provide. If you wish to become the commander-in-chief, you’ll need to convince the queen on your own.”
“That’s what I’ll do then. Master, thank you.” I bowed to him and left.

***

As I moved briskly through the halls, Luxion floated close behind me.
“You’re not going to run?” he asked.
“I gave up on that. I’m going to fight the principality.”
“I thought you didn’t want to move up the social ladder? Becoming commander-in-chief seems about as far from that wish as possible.”

Yes, it was hypocritical to claim I didn't want higher status at this point, but nonetheless…
"Sorry," I said, "but I'm the type of guy who likes to try everything once."
"Are you going to fight using ideals? I cannot comprehend this either."
Was I going to fight for the people? It might sound like a lie coming from me, but I was entirely serious. Maybe it was because I'd been an ordinary civilian in my previous life, but seeing innocent people die for no reason left a bad taste in my mouth. If this continent sank into the sea, thousands of happy families steadily scraping by would lose their lives. Marie was the one who had messed up this world's trajectory, but the ones who would suffer most were normal people.
I couldn't leave things the way they were. That was reason enough to fight.
"I'm not a fan of genocide," I said simply.
"I see no issue with running away," said Luxion. "This isn't your responsibility. I fail to understand your decision."
"I don't understand it myself. Even now, I want to get the hell out of here. But if I run, I know I'll think about it later. I'll spend the rest of my life lying awake at night, wondering if I made the right choice."
I didn't want to spend years or even decades angsting over my decision. Besides, I was a knight. Never mind all the court ranking crap, I was in a position to defend people during an emergency, and by Japanese standards, that mattered. If I saw someone with such status run at the first sign of trouble, I would loathe them.
"So you plan to earn more prestige? If you're successful, it will only get you wrapped up in even more trouble."
I shrugged. "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Now isn't the time to be worrying about all that."
I had no interest in further promotions. If possible, I still wanted to live a quiet life. However…
"Everyone else is useless and unreliable, so I have to do it. Help me out, Luxion."
"You really are hopeless, Master."

Chapter 6:
Bonds

QUEEN MYLENE and I were in a room by ourselves, standing face-to-face. I'd succeeded in getting an audience with her and had relayed my desire to take supreme command.

Her Majesty was, of course, flabbergasted. "Are you serious?"

I couldn't blame her. Anyone would question the sanity of an academy student asking for so much power.

"I'm serious," I said. "I want supreme command. Can you help me?"

"The people don't trust you." Her face was the picture of composure—gone was the adorable, girlish smile. "Neither do you possess the accomplishments to warrant the assignment. Even if I did recommend you for the role, the people would assume I had lost my mind."

"Fine, then you lose. If you refuse me this, I'll run away. Or do you have someone else in mind for the position?"

She didn't. No one else could stand against the Principality of Fanoss or their Giants, and we both knew it.

Her gaze dropped to the floor. "It's all come back to haunt us now," she murmured. "His Majesty and his advisers are considering a direct charge against the principality's main force. They intend to ignore the Giant and finish the battle as quickly as possible."

"They won't even get close. The Giant will wipe them out."

"Leon, power alone doesn't determine victory. It doesn't matter if you are more capable *or* more determined than our…wanting king. The people believe in him, not you. That's just how they are. Even if I did install you as commander-in-chief, you would not be heeded."

She sounded pretty harsh on our king there, but I had to put that on the back burner for now. I was more just happy she had such a high opinion of me.

"All right, but if you leave it to someone else, they won't win," I said. "And we *need* the royal family's ship. It has its own special power, doesn't it?"

She pulled a face. "H-how do you even know about the ship? It's—"

I stepped forward, backing her into the wall, and planted my hand beside her head. "That ship helped this nation's founders claim the land for their kingdom. It's the royal family's secret weapon. Right?"

"Yes…that's right. So you see why it isn't something so simply lent to just anyone. It's a Lost Item, too."

It wasn't the same type as Luxion, no—but it was absolutely essential. I pressed even closer to her. "I need it. Please, lend it to me."

"It won't work. Even His Majesty and I can't activate it."

"Prince Julius and Marie will, though. Gather her other four lovers as well."

"But," she protested, "the Saint—Marie awaits execution."

We had to have Marie. I was pretty damn sure we needed the power of the Saint, specifically, and if Marie died, the temple might well take its sweet time recognizing Livia as the real Saint in her place. Marie was our safest bet. All I had to do after that was get Livia on board with them. That way we could get their split roles in the same place—Marie as the Saint, Livia with her special power. I had no other solution.

"Luxion, explain it to the queen. Tell her why we don't have time to waste."

"Very well." Luxion slipped out from behind me.

Queen Mylene gasped. "This—he's the familiar from the reports?"

My partner proceeded to relay the details of our situation, informing her that there were *two* Giants—one in the sky and one in the sea below the continent.

Her Majesty went ghostly pale. "Is this true?"

"Yes," said Luxion. "And I have further bad news. Since their appearance, transmissions have become increasingly unstable. In a matter of days, long-range communication devices will likely become utterly unusable."

"The more I hear, the worse it sounds." The queen pressed a hand over her face. "Leon, can you really win?"

"I *will* win, but I need you to prepare some things for me—"

"The Saint and the royal family's ship, yes. I see. And you need power to demand these things." Her expression hardened as she looked into my eyes. "If we do this, Marquess Frampton will oppose us. We will make an enemy out of the largest political faction in the kingdom. We will have few—if any allies."

I glanced at Luxion, and his eyeball moved up and down in a nod. "We're fine with that."

"Honestly, I realize this was a situation of our own making, but I wish the other knights shared your loyalty."

Loyalty? I didn't have a drop of it in me.

"What do you mean by 'situation of your own making'?" I asked.

"Until now, we've forced a select group of men to bear all the kingdom's burdens. We'll speak more on it once you've safely returned. Now, you had better win and come back in one piece. Understood?"

I nodded.

Her cheeks heated up as she cleared her throat. Goddamn adorable. "Um, also, I would appreciate it if you'd take a few steps back."

Oh, whoops. I finally put some distance between us.

The queen took a deep breath and then fixed her gaze on me once more. "Leon, I owe you a great deal. I'll lay the groundwork, but I meant it when I said we won't have many allies. You won't be able to expect much in the way of military aid. Can you still win, knowing that?"

"Yes. But speaking of military aid, I have something in mind already."

A lack of allies didn't bother me. I had the power of friendship on my side.

***

The capital was in an uproar. Hundreds, thousands of citizens were fleeing, among them a number of nobles and knights abandoning their posts. Some of the men even left their legal wives behind, choosing to run away with their lovers instead. I understood the impulse, but I still didn't entirely approve.

Upon my return to the academy, I was shocked by the change.

"W-wait! Take me with you!" A girl clung to the heir of a border region.

He violently shoved her away. "You ignored me for months! Don't start relying on me now!"

The students were hightailing it to their home territories, and similar spats followed them wherever they ran.

One rich viscount from the palace clutched onto a girl for dear life. "Don't abandon me! Did you forget how much money I lavished on you?!"

"I'll die if I stay! And if they wipe out the capital, what use will you be?!"

The emergency had made all these jerks lose their minds, but I didn't feel the least bit happy to see it. What a pathetic way to go.

Luxion guided me along. "This way, Master. The boys have already gathered."

"I'm just glad they're still here. Luxion, you go ahead and find Livia and Angie. Do whatever you can to help them! And if you see anyone else we know, bring them as well."

"I don't mind, but are you sure you'll be all right on your own?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm sure they'll be with us."

My friendship with Daniel and Raymond is the real deal!

***

I had gathered my friends in a deserted classroom used for storage. We needed to hide from all the fracas outside, but I also had a proposition.

"All right, boys," I said, "it's do or die. I'm leading the charge against the principality—are you with me?"

"Absolutely not," said Raymond.

"Yeah, it's gonna be a no from me," said Daniel.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" I shouted.

"The principality wrecked the kingdom's forces. That monster of theirs took out almost two hundred ships, right? There's no way we can fight something like that," Raymond pointed out.

He wasn't wrong.

Daniel shook his head. "Leon, give it up. They arrested you on false charges, didn't they? You have no reason to put in so much effort. If they lose, we just have to swear allegiance to the principality and we're done."

Regional lords ruled their own islands and swore fealty to their strongest neighbor. These guys, my friends, were the sons of those lords, so switching allegiance just made sense to them—every one of them agreed.

“Yep, like he said,” said one. “Oh, did you know? In the principality, men have more social cachet than women. When it comes to marriage, women are the ones scrambling to find a good match.”
“Seriously? Shoot, forget this war—sign me up for the principality right now!”
“Me, too!”
I empathize with you guys so much it hurts, but have some freakin’ loyalty! Not that I have any myself…
All these guys had to do was go home and wait for the storm to pass. Meanwhile, the rich nobles who’d until now flaunted their wealth and status were in a panic. They’d all come from mainland or the court—either way, they couldn’t escape the oncoming principality fleet. My friends, meanwhile, cared more about the other hostile nations stalking the kingdom’s borders. Mostly, they just wanted to see how the tides would change.
This exact indifference was probably what the queen had meant when she said the kingdom’s past would come back to haunt it.
Being so packed with dudes, the storage room smelled like an actual sausage fest. I almost choked taking a deep breath. Nonetheless, I kept my composure and produced a document from my pocket. “Take a look at this.”
Raymond pushed his glasses up his nose, scanning the page. “This is the sales contract for those airships you gave us. What about it?”
“That’s right—the airships I gave you. Right now, you’ve all got crews training in your territories, right?”
Daniel nodded. “Yeah. I hear those ships are a dream to fly—excellent performance. My crew’s really pleased.”
The other boys joined in, enthusiastically crowing about the quality of their battleships. Only Raymond blanched as he stared at me.
“Leon, you can’t mean…”
“That’s right. I’m the only one with a facility that can properly maintain your airships. Think you can just run away and try somebody else? Go for it—if you want subpar service. Those machines are cutting-edge technology, so if you don’t come to *me* for maintenance, they’ll stop running.”
The contracts made it clear: I’d used unique technology to modify these airships; no one else could even hope to fix them.
I watched as the panic began to set in.
“I’m going to fight the principality whether you help me or not,” I said. “You realize what that means, don’t you? If I win and you don’t help, you’ll be at my mercy. You’ll have to brownnose every day to stay in my good graces if you want to keep those ships. Of course, if I lose, you’ll be even worse off. What happens when they take my family’s territory? Do you really think the principality will let you off when they find out you’re tied to me?”
Then the screams began.
“That’s underhanded!”
“Let’s tie him up and offer him to Princess Hertrude!”
“But they’ve already dragged her off to the palace!”

“Calm down, idiots!” I barked. “Do you really think the enemy would let you just roll over and submit? This is the principality we’re talking about. They *loathe* the kingdom. Worst case, they’ll steal your territories and treat you like slaves.”
Letting that sink in, I lowered my voice. “Listen. It’ll be fine. Work with me. Survive, and I’ll give you a discount on future maintenance for your airships. Plus, you’ll be heroes. Sounds like a pretty good deal to me. All you have to do to get all that praise is hide behind me and shoot your cannons.”
They all scowled.
“Have some faith,” I wheedled. “I’m fighting because we can win. You’ve all seen me fight—you know I’m not the type of guy who charges headlong into a battle if he isn’t absolutely certain he’s gonna win.”
“W-well, if you put it like that…”
“True, Leon’s wormed out of every tight spot he’s been in so far.”
“If he says we can win, maybe it’s true.”
I was bringing them around—how’s that for skillful negotiations?
Daniel, however, waffled. “But you’re always so underhanded.”
“Aw, is that a compliment I’m hearing?” I grinned. “Don’t worry. Underhanded I may be, but I’m your ally. That’s reassuring, isn’t it?”
Raymond raked his fingers through his hair. “It’s because you’re so underhanded that we’re in this mess in the first place. This is a disaster!”
But eventually, everyone gave in—I mean, they, uh, steeled themselves for the coming challenge. Either way, they agreed to follow me.
See that, principality? This is the power of friendship!
“Thank you, all of you! Let’s be friends forever and ever, okay?”
They glared.
“Screw you!”
“You devil!”
“I knew that stupid contract was a trap!”
Yeah, yeah. They could wail all they wanted; we were going up against the final boss.
All right, time for the next step.

***

Luxion had made his way to Livia’s room to report.
“Leon’s going to fight the principality?” she gasped.
Angie shook her head in exasperation. “He may be a viscount, but I can’t believe the kingdom made a *student* commander-in-chief. Does that mean even His Majesty and Prince Julius will be under his command? And what about our other forces—are there any?”
Luxion’s single eye moved from side to side as if shaking his head.
“Currently, we have scraped together about twenty ships, including the *Partner*. Who knows what the kingdom’s army can muster? We can’t hope for much of anything from the temple.”

Angie held her forehead. “Leon seriously plans to fight them with that? What about the generals? Or the regional lords’ battleships?”
“Further army assistance depends on Mylene. As for the regional nobles, they’re occupied defending your borders. Most of them couldn’t help the capital even if they wanted to. All others who could feasibly lend assistance are sitting on the sidelines to watch how things play out.”
Livia glanced over at Angie. “Why won’t they help us?”
“Livia, do you understand why the regional lords obey the kingdom to begin with?”
“Um…because they swore allegiance?”
“No… The regional lords bow simply because the kingdom is more powerful. If the kingdom is weakened, they won’t hesitate to turn traitor. Especially after the kingdom spent so many years deliberately undermining them.”
“Huh?” Livia furrowed her brow.
So, it’s just as I suspected, Luxion thought. I did think this kingdom odd. Master was ready to blame his unfortunate circumstances on otome game dynamics, but of course there was an explanation for this society’s eccentricities.
As Redgrave House had strong ties to the royal family, their view of the world skewed in favor of the kingdom. Angie’s prior opinions of regional lords therefore spoke volumes about the royal family’s feelings as well.
“The kingdom has worked to ensure the regional lords can’t accumulate power. Our particular marriage customs, for example—they’re just one method by which the royal family limits the regional nobility.” Angie shook her head and stood. “I’m going to go see my father. I want to lend Leon whatever aid I can. There must be something I can do to help.”
“Are you certain?” Luxion asked.
She smiled. “Leon said he was going to fight. He only did so because he has a chance of winning, right? I believe in him.”
Livia’s face fell, but she soon stood and stepped close to Angie.
“In that case, let’s head to the palace together,” said Luxion as he guided them out of the room. “The duke will be there.”
“I appreciate it. Let’s go,” Angie said with a solemn expression. “Livia, what will you do?”
“I’m going, too!”
And so, with Luxion, the two of them hurried to the palace.

***

The floating island next to the capital saw more airship traffic than usual. Airships crowded the harbor, making it difficult to move. My older brother, Nicks, was waiting for me there.
“Leon, you’re all right!” He seemed delighted to see me.
My older sister, Jenna, stood nearby. “Did you break out of prison?!”

And of course, her personal servant, Miauler, was with her. The moment he spotted me, his eyes rounded with panic.
“Perfect timing,” said Nicks. “You can hop on with us. Father just got here to pick us up.” He pointed to an airship.
“Yeah, it really is perfect timing.” I headed inside and stopped one of the crew members. “Hey, where’s Father?”
“He’s on the bridge. Young Master, what have you done this time?”
“It wasn’t me. Blame my sister’s cat-eared slave. And don’t let him on board!”
That little bastard wanted to betray me? Fine. He couldn’t be with Jenna anymore. My bratty sister pitched a real fit, but I rolled my eyes and hurried down the ship’s corridors. When I made it to the bridge, I found my father consulting with the ship’s captain.
“Lord Balcus, civilians are mobbing our ship, trying to flee the capital.”
“Once my children are on board, fit as many people as you can and we’ll set off. Hmm? Leon, is that you?” My father’s eyes lit up when he spotted me, but almost as quickly, his face turned grim. “What did you do this time? I heard they threw you in the dungeon.”
“Sorry, Father, but I need you to lend me your help.”
“Huh? What in the world are you—”
I interrupted to explain the situation, why I’d been arrested and what led to it—including how that creep Miauler had helped. “But if I’m going into battle now, I’d like to have your help.”
My father’s face had paled. I almost felt bad for him. “You really are an idiot,” he said. “No one would blame you for running away—so why aren’t you? You are such a fool of a son.”
The airship I’d given my father was an enormous battleship, capable of truly impressive performance. Its crew was in full command of its operations, too. Of all the people I could rely on, my father was the strongest.
As he debated this, Nicks and Jenna made their way to the bridge, Miauler following behind them.
“Father,” Nicks began in a rush, “Zola and her friends are outside the ship demanding you let them on. She’s got a huge group of people with her.”
Father expelled a sigh and started toward the exit. On the way, he grabbed Miauler by the scruff and yanked him along.
“H-hold on! Let Miauler go!” Jenna protested. “Why are you being so violent?”
Miauler tried to resist, but Father’s grip was rock solid.
“Please, unhand me,” Miauler cried. “I haven’t done anything!”
“You sold out my son. I won’t have you on my ship. You hear me, you useless furball?!” Father roared in anger—the first time I’d ever heard him do it. Boy, was he pissed. He glared at Jenna. “How dare you let Leon’s betrayer onto my ship! Nicks, you stay here on the bridge. Jenna, go to your room and stay quiet. Someone, escort her. Now!”

One of the crew took hold of my sister and pulled her along while my father and I headed for the exit. We entered a cacophony—thousands of people hustled all over the harbor.
Zola waited for us on the dock, her companions in tow. The moment she spotted us, she wailed, “Balcus! Hurry up and let us on board! We need to head for the capital to retrieve my assets from the manor! Understood?”
Without responding, Father sent Miauler stumbling forward.
“W-wait, please! Listen to me—”
“Shut up.” Father unsheathed the sword hanging at his side. The blade whistled through the air and took Miauler’s head off in a single stroke. Father slammed his foot into the demi-human’s lifeless body. Both it and the detached head plummeting through the air.
Zola snapped her mouth shut and cringed. My oldest brother, Rutart, cowered behind her.
“We’re going to war,” Father said. “Rutart, you’ll be taking part. It’ll be your first battle.”
“D-don’t give me orders, you backwoods barbarian!”
I held my tongue.
“Balcus, how dare you!” Zola snapped, barely recovered from her shock. “Do you realize what you owe me for all those years of peace—”
“Hand over Rutart,” Father repeated. “We’re going to war.”
I had never seen him like this.
Zola stomped. “Backwater scum! Arrogant fool! Rutart is *my* beloved boy! There isn’t even a drop of your filthy blood in his veins. If you want to go to war so badly, send your own useless child!”
Ah. In her fury, she’d blurted out the truth—not a surprising revelation, but still horrifying.
Father, however, relaxed. “I figured as much. Well, that’s a relief. Goodbye, Zola.”
“W-wait!” Zola cried. “I didn’t mean it. Balcus! If you really want an heir, I can always have one for you now. Just help me escape!”
“Sorry, I’m busy.” Father turned and signaled the crew. A squad of Bartfort House’s armored knights came rushing down to the dock. “Escort Zola out of the harbor. And Leon!”
“Yes!” I had always seen my father as a spineless, pitiful man, but he looked pretty badass today.
“Once I get everyone safely back home, I’ll come back to the capital. But I have a question for you—are you prepared for this? Mentally speaking, I mean.” His brow creased with concern.
He hadn’t changed at all. For some reason, that made me happy. Although I felt a bit pathetic for making him worry, I nodded.
“All right. Then you can count on my support. Do things your way. Not that you would listen to me even if I opposed you. Honestly, you’re always full of surprises.”
Thanks, Father. That’s what I’ll do.

I did honestly feel bad for causing him so much trouble. Whether it was in my current life or my previous one, I was always giving my parents grief.

***

Once I returned to the palace, Minister Bernard rushed toward me with his report. “Viscount, we were barely able to scrape together any of the kingdom’s army. We also have fewer land forces than we hoped. Only about fifty functional airships.”
Frankly, that was more than I’d expected.
“I was able to secure twenty-four ships on my end, including the *Partner*,” I said. “Oh, crap—”
Another tremor rippled through the ground. They kept getting stronger.
Minister Bernard paled, even whiter than before. “Viscount, be frank with me. Can we win this? I—I need to know whether to evacuate my family.”
“We can defeat the principality, no question. The problem is their Giant.”
I hadn’t known about any second princess in the game, but if this Hertrauda had summoned something this big with another Magic Flute, I suspected it had the same characteristics as the final boss I knew about. If so, we had only one way to vanquish it, and that was to combine the Saint’s power with Livia’s.
Livia could “speak directly to people’s hearts.” Why did she possess such a unique ability, you ask? Hell if I knew. Ask the game devs! Regardless, we needed her. The Saint’s power alone wouldn’t cut it.
Honestly, I still didn’t understand why Marie didn’t seem to know this.
“You truly are amazing,” said the minister. “Well, how about it? Once this is over, will you take my Clarice as your bride?”
I almost laughed, thinking it a joke, but his eyes were entirely serious. Sweat beaded on my forehead. “I’ll, uh, think about it if we win this thing. Right now I’m kinda busy, you know.”
“Yes, true enough. Preparations should be finished soon in the audience chamber. Take a break until we’re ready. We’ve gathered the people you requested.”
The minister guided me to a reception room not far from the audience chamber, where Marie and the others were waiting.

***

Marie sat in a corner, covered in filth, her once white dress stained and smeared. She hugged her legs to her chest and kept her face buried against her knees. Prince Julius and her other four lovers fussed over her worriedly. Carla lingered at the edge of the room, watching from afar. Her clothes hung in similar disarray.
When I entered, Kyle dragged his feet over to me. “I heard they arrested you on false charges. You sure you aren’t cursed?”

“If you want cursed, look at your mistress. What happened anyway?”
Exhaustion lined Kyle’s face, but he filled me in. “Mistress confessed she wasn’t the Saint in front of everyone, so her entourage turned on her. Then the temple took her prisoner and threw her in the dungeon.”
“Seriously? That’s kinda hilarious.”
“It wasn’t the least bit funny to me. And she’s been like this ever since.”
Kyle paused. “Are they really going to execute her?”
Well, falsely claiming to be the Saint was a pretty serious offense. Of course the temple didn’t want to forgive her. I was impressed Queen Mylene managed to wrangle her out of their grasp.
“The royal family only had the execution delayed. Whether we win or lose, her life is still forfeit,” I said.
Prince Julius glared daggers at me. Turning to Marie, he cooed, “Don’t let Bartfort get to you. It’s okay. We’re here.”
“Shut up,” Marie said.
“Huh?”
“I said shut up! What part of this looks okay to you?! Do you know what’s going to happen? You didn’t even see that monster, but you think we can win? I wish I could be so stupid and carefree!”
“Marie?”
“Get out of here!” she shrieked at the prince. “All of you, out! I hate you all, every last one you!”
Carla rushed over to her. “Don’t push us away, Lady Marie. We’re friends! You said so yourself!”
“That was a lie—*obviously*,” Marie snarled. “Are you really that dense? No wonder everyone bullied you. I only used you to piss off that annoying background character over there. Otherwise I’d never touch a traitor like you.”
Carla burst into tears.
I clicked my tongue. “Welp, there you have it, your true colors. You were pretty good at playing cute and harmless, I gotta admit. But the cat’s outta the bag now.”
Marie glared at me, eyes filled with hate.
“Bartfort, enough!” Chris snapped. “She’s just exhausted.”
That only made her start in on him, too. “Excuse me? I’m the one who should be saying enough! You act pretty high and mighty for someone who’s useless without a sword in their hands!”
“Wha…?!”
Marie turned her ire on Greg next. “And you—you’re all talk. What’s all that nonsense you spew about ‘actual experience’? You’re totally worthless. And you, purple guy. A disgusting narcissist. Green dude, you give me the creeps. I never know what the heck is going through your head. And finally, you…” She rounded on the prince. “You’re the biggest problem here!”
“Marie? What in the world has gotten into you?” Prince Julius gawked at her, unable to comprehend the personality change.

“Outside your royal title, you have no value at all.” Marie broke out into hysterical laughter. “You’re all a bunch of idiots. You threw away everything—your positions, your honor, even your finances—and you thought it’d make me happy? You’re out of your minds.” Still cackling, she turned toward Kyle. “And you, you annoying little pipsqueak… You’ve got some ego. If I wasn’t kind enough to forgive your nasty attitude, you’d have already been sent back to the slave company. You should be grateful!”

Everyone in the room gaped in horror.

“You should have all been *nicer* to me!” she wailed. “And you should have *listened*! I hate people who ignore me and do whatever they want. I hate people who can’t be useful. I hate them, I hate them, I hate them!”

I snorted. “This is pitiful.”

“Shut up! Go jump off a building! You’re the reason I can’t be happy! I demand a refund. Give it back! Give my happiness back to me!”

As she wept, Angie and Livia stepped into the room.

“Leon! You’re all right!” Angie paused. “Uh, what happened?”

“Why is Marie crying?” Livia asked, concerned.

Ugh, just when we’d been reunited, too. I sighed. “Would you all mind leaving for a bit? I’d like to speak with Marie.”

As they filed out, Marie hiccuped and sniffed, alone, until she collapsed. The exhaustion had caught up to her. She immediately fell asleep.

She really does piss me off.

***

Marie dreamed again.

She saw the day her brother abandoned her on the street, leaving her in tears—a memory from her previous life. She’d skinned her knee and sat on the ground, wailing. She remembered crying herself to sleep.

I really was an idiot. I should have just hurried on home, but I was so stubborn. Wait…how did I end up getting back to our house after that?

The image in front of her blurred, indistinct, but she spotted a boy venturing closer. He was cursing under his breath. “You idiot. If you had the energy to cry yourself to sleep, you should have just walked.”

Her older brother had returned. He scooped her up for a piggyback ride.

That’s right. He came back for me. What a turd. He should have just done that to begin with.

She wanted to berate him for it, but she had tears in her eyes. Her younger self looked so relieved as she slept safely against her brother’s back. Drool dribbled from her mouth, soaking into his shirt. Marie figured he’d start cursing again, but instead…

“Why do you rely on me like this?” He smiled faintly.

Marie pressed a hand close to her heart and squeezed it into a fist. Now she remembered—her brother had a filthy mouth, but he was kind.

Jerk… You shouldn’t have died. Why did you have to die on me?

She remembered the day he passed.
I wanted you to gripe at me like you always did.
When she returned from her trip abroad, her parents had slapped her across the face. They'd run her out of the house as soon as his funeral was over.
I knew that as long as I had you around, I could get through anything. Once you were gone, I was so miserable. Why did you have to die? Bubby…
Although they'd always snapped at each other, she'd been happy with their relationship. She could leave anything to him, and he would do it, no matter how reluctant he was. She took advantage of this, certainly, just like with the otome game she made him finish for her.
But then he *died* playing her stupid game, and her life went off the rails. She'd been on an overseas trip with a friend, and when she got back, she learned he had tripped on some stairs and died from the fall. He'd sent an email to their mom before the accident, so her parents knew what she'd made him do—that she'd lied about the trip, about work, about money, all to make him play a game. They grew so cold after that. They didn't trust her at all.
Marie had never hated her brother, not really. He griped, but he always saved her.
But she couldn't even remember what he looked like anymore. It pained her.
Please, I need you. Why aren't you here? Save me…

***

"Bubby…" Marie was muttering in her sleep.
I sat nearby, frowning. I really couldn't stop thinking of my little sister whenever I saw her. She'd always done the same thing, dragging me into her trouble and wearing me out. I had the worst luck with women.
"Master, are you sure it's wise to let her sleep like this?"
I'd brought an empty gun to threaten her with, just in case I needed extra leverage. I glanced over at the table where it sat. "Let her get a little bit more rest. We still have time."
"You mean you *aren't* going to violently shake her until she wakes and force her to spill her guts?"
"Just what kind of person do you think I am?! Don't answer that. Odds are you'll call me unfeeling scum or something awful like that."
"I was going to say you're an indecisive, incompetent loser, but you were close, I suppose."
They weren't remotely close! That made "unfeeling scum" sound like a compliment.
As I glared at Luxion, Marie stirred and sat up. Her eyes were red and swollen, and her hair was a disheveled mess. A terrifying sight to behold.

I reached for the gun, brandishing it. “Good, you’re awake. It’s time for us to have another little talk.”
“No,” she mumbled. “I’m not doing anything until my big brother comes.”
What is she going on about? Is her brain fried? She really is hopeless. “Your big brother? If he’s related to you, he’s definitely a real sleazeball.”
“Don’t make fun of him!” Marie snatched up the closest thing she could and hurled it at me.
I snatched up Luxion and used him as a shield.
“Master, I’ll be sure to remember this,” he said resentfully.
Whatever! I’d get to him later. “You really are a brat,” I snapped at Marie. “I was an idiot for thinking you and my little sister were anything alike. She was way better than you!”
“Shut up! I’m sure your little sister is a crazy idiot, just like you!”
True, she was crazy, and an idiot, and so selfish it infuriated me literally *all the time*, but Marie had no right to say that!
“She was a hundred times better than you! Okay, fine, her personality sucked, and she liked watching guys get it on. And did I mention her personality sucked? But I’d still take her over you any day!”
She huffed. “Yeah? Well, my older brother was a hundred times better than you. More! Sure, he looked like a background character, too, and he was a complete wallflower, and he had a dirty mouth and a rotten personality *and* a dirty mouth… Anyway! Don’t diss my big brother!”
This was ridiculous. We were both gasping for breath by the end.
“Why did you become the Saint anyway?” I muttered, composing myself. “If you cleared the game, you should know Livia’s power is essential to win. I can’t believe you went into battle without the royal family’s ship.”
Marie’s shoulders shook. “I *didn’t* know that! I wasn’t—I mean, my big brother cleared the game for me. But he died right after, and I only got to check the save data after things had calmed down. I only got to see the CGs and videos!”
So she only had a half-assed understanding of the game, but she still tried for the reverse harem ending?!
H-hold up. Wait a minute here. Her older brother cleared it for her? I paused. “The only reason I played the game was because my little sister told me to when she went on a trip. She forced the game on me and made me clear it while she was gone… Don’t tell me, are you…? No way.”
Marie stared at me, jaw agape. “Huh?”
I stared hard at her face. No… No way… I know this face! It pisses me off—it always pissed me off. There’s no mistake! Marie’s my little sister!
“So then you’re my…?” Marie gasped. Then she flung herself at me, arms spread wide. “Bubbyyyyyyy—ouch!”
I bonked her over the head with the butt of my gun. “*You*, of all people!” I howled.
There was a clamor on the other side of the door, but I couldn’t give a crap—all my attention was on the weasel of a girl in front of me.

“You’re being awfully mean. I’m your little sister! We’re finally reunited!”
“Ha!” I glared. “I swore to myself if I ever saw you again, I’d have my revenge.”
“You’re the one who went blabbing to Mom and made everything so complicated! Do you have any idea how much I suffered after that?”
“You were the problem in the first place!” I hesitated, fury suddenly leeching from me. “No, wait. How *were* Mom and Dad after that?”
Luxion glanced between the two of us. “It seems to me you two aren’t actually putting on an act. Hmmm. I suppose that means you really were telling the truth when you said this was an otome game you were reincarnated into.”
This little jerk, did he still doubt me after all this time?

Chapter 7:
Destiny

"YOU PAWNED YOUR KID OFF on our parents?!" I groaned.
"Y-yeah. I mean, they insisted I couldn't raise her by myself. Can you believe it? So cruel…"
"That's not cruel at all! In fact, that was probably the best thing for my niece. I'm actually kind of relieved. They did the right thing."
We lounged in the reception room, reminiscing as siblings who'd shared a past life. Don't get me wrong: I wasn't the least bit happy about this. My own flesh and blood was the one who'd made a mess of this world, same as the last. If anything, I wanted to cry. One positive: I got to hear what had happened to my parents following my death.
"What was the last thing you remember before you reincarnated here?" I asked her.
"Um, well, my boyfriend beat me. I remember thinking it was getting particularly bad, but by the time I realized what was happening, I was here in this world." She poked out her tongue as if to say, *Tee hee!*
Annoyed—was she really going to joke about that?—I pointed my gun at her. She jumped back, both hands in the air. "C'mon, Bubby, I really did do my bestest!"
"Shut up! And don't use a cutesy word like 'bestest' when you're practically a grandma! You're making my skin crawl."
"That's rich coming from you, you turd! That means you're a grandpa inside there, too!"
And what about our parents? Ugh, it did pain me that we had no idea what had happened after…
"Anyway," I said, because *hoo boy*, I needed to change the subject, "you're going to have to work with Livia."
"Uh, did you hit your head? I'm on a one-way track to execution right now."
I snorted. "You sure are. But you have some time before you die. You can at least take things seriously and not run away from the problems you created."
Tears welled in her eyes. "But I don't want to die! Save me, Bubby!"
Turd, big brother, bubby—she sure had a lot of names for me. If only she had as much respect.
Then Marie started genuinely sobbing. "Plus, I—I don't wanna fight that monster again. I refuse to be part of this war!"
"Excuse me? The whole reason all this got so messed up was because you made yourself the Saint. Suck it up and get on the damn airship. All you have to do is be support for Livia."

She blinked up at me through the tears streaming down her face. “Why *her*? I’m the one you should be saving!” With that, she ran and burst out the door.
“Urgh, moron!”
Her timing couldn’t have been any worse. The moment she was gone, Minister Bernard entered. “Viscount, our preparations are complete. Please join me in the audience chamber.”
So many people had fled the palace, even a minister was running all over with errands. I couldn’t add to his burdens any further. I gave up and followed him.
Marie still pissed me off, but now I was torn. How *should* I handle the situation?

***

Marie raced down the hall.
Livia watched her from a distance, dumbfounded. “Marie is…running away?”
Angie glared at Marie’s receding figure. “That girl… Does she seriously intend to just leave after coming this far?”
Livia didn’t think it wise to let Angie go after Marie with that menacing look on her face. “Angie, why don’t you go on to the audience chamber? I’ll go after Marie and convince her to help us!”
“Oh, fine.” Angie had been summoned anyway, so she couldn’t very well delay.
It’s an important moment for Leon as well, Livia thought to herself, Angie needs to be there. I’d just be in the way.
She hurried after Marie, dashing down the palace corridor. As she did, tears welled up in her eyes. Marie wasn’t the only one running from her problems. *I don’t suit him at all. I knew that from the start. He’s got Angie. So why can’t I let go of him?*
Marie had fled to one of the palace’s rooftops, a lush garden with a huge variety of plants—and it was a complete dead end. She had nowhere else to run.
Livia hunched over when she reached it, wheezing as she tried to catch her breath.
As the two of them composed themselves, Marie spoke first. “I’ll give it back.”
“Huh?” Livia tilted her head.
“I’ll give it all back to you, so I want you to return what’s mine, too. All you need is the prince. You can have him, the other boys, and Kyle, too. I’ll even give you the Saint’s title. You can take it all!” Marie shouted. Livia had no idea what she was going on about. “So you do the same. Give me back my big brother. Give Leon back! I’ll return everything I took, so hand him over!”

Livia inhaled. She stepped closer and lifted her right hand, striking Marie across the face. The force sent Marie stumbling to the ground.
Marie pressed a hand over her swollen cheek and smiled weakly. “Ah, this brings back memories. My parents used to hit me like this. It really stings. So, what? Are you angry? Don’t worry. I said I’d give it all back. Now you can be happy.”
Tears rolled down Livia’s cheeks, and she collapsed to her knees.
Marie stared at her, utterly bewildered.
“Leon isn’t an *object*,” said Livia. “I just wanted to be with him while he was still at the academy. I don’t need anything else!”
Leon was a noble and Livia a commoner. The difference in their status might as well be an unscalable wall. Sure, a similar wall separated Leon and Angie as well, but it was nowhere near as insurmountable. The two of them suited each other. Livia wanted them to be happy together. She had to be the one to give up and bow out.
“So don’t tell me to give him back,” she whispered. “Leon doesn’t even… belong to me in the first place.”
Marie dropped her gaze and laughed. “So what, then? That means I’ve really lost it all? This sucks. This was my second chance at life, but all I’ve done is lose everything.” She burst into tears, as well, burying her face in her hands as she sobbed. “I knew everything. I thought it would go well for me. Why can’t I be happy?”
Livia watched helplessly, unsure of what to say.
“So this is where you were?” a familiar voice cut in.
“Lady Marie!”
Kyle and Carla hurried to Marie’s side. The two of them had been searching for her. Marie lifted her face, and they looked at her worriedly.
“You guys…why?” Marie blurted. Her brows furrowed, clearly wondering, *Why are you two here?*
“I-I really would be alone without you, Lady Marie,” Carla cried. “I was so happy when you reached your hand out to save me! And you really are very kind.”
Kyle gave Carla a sidelong glance, a bit embarrassed. “Part of it is my fault, but you still went too far. I guess we’re even, though. I have no idea what the other five think, but we can’t abandon you. It’d be too pitiful.”
Marie sobbed even harder. “I’m…I’m so sorry! I really am so, so sorry, you two…”
Kyle rubbed his eyes with his sleeve, hiding his own tears. “Well, come on. Fake or not, you are the Saint. You need to at least look the part.”
With Carla and Kyle supporting her, Marie managed to stand up. The two bowed their heads toward Livia and escorted Marie back inside the palace.
Alone, Livia dropped her gaze to the ground and laughed. “Liar. You haven’t lost everything. You have two people at your side. You’re not the one who’s all alone. I’m…” The words tumbled out, and when she realized what she was saying, she slapped her hands over her mouth.

Her heart swelled with darkness, and fresh tears sprang up at the corners of her eyes.
I’m the one who really won’t have anything left.

***

Angie stood at the entrance to the rooftop garden. She didn't even glance at the others as they passed. Her eyes were fixed on Livia, a few steps away, crying by herself.
"Livia… Of course. You and Leon were always together." Angie's heart ached. She'd realized Livia's feelings before, but the three of them always had so much fun together that she'd turned her eyes from the truth. "I'm sorry. If I hadn't fallen for him, too, you wouldn't be suffering like this right now. Please forgive me, Livia."
Angie pressed her hand over her mouth as the tears came pouring out. She hastily wiped them away and started forward. "Livia!"
Livia tried to hide her face and play it off. "Angie? Uh, um…Marie already went back inside. Please, um, don't look at my face right now. A lot happened, and…"
Angie sucked in a breath before blurting, "I love Leon."
Livia snapped her mouth shut and stared down at the ground. Fresh tears fell toward the pavement.
"And," Angie continued, "that's why I don't want you to pull back."
"Huh?"
Angie held out a hand and helped Livia back to her feet. Facing her, Angie clasped both of Livia's hands. "You're fine the way you are. Make sure to tell Leon how you feel."
"I-I already told him once. He played it off right after and wouldn't give me an answer. Because he already has feelings for you."
Angie shook her head. "Even so! Even if you don't feel confident, tell him again. This time we'll make sure he can't run away. We won't let him play it off either. I'm going to tell him how I feel, so you do the same." She threw her arms around Livia, hugging the crying girl close.
"Are you sure? I mean, you two are nobility…"
"Idiot. Status has nothing to do with this. If that was all there was to it, we wouldn't be suffering in the first place. So there's nothing left for us to do but confess, right?" Angie's voice was gentle as she added, "You're important to me, too. So dry up those tears."
Livia looped her arms around Angie and squeezed, nodding. "Okay."

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I scanned the audience chamber, but there was no sign of Angie and Livia.
Crap. This is kinda disheartening.
The five idiots were here at least, but they'd been horribly distracted since Marie blew up at them.
There they go, moping over their stupid infatuation while I'm over here seriously trying to figure out how to use real love to get us out of this situation!

My plan to use the love between Marie and her reverse harem was up in flames. I needed a love strong enough to beat the principality's Giant! I needed the love to end all loves! The strongest weapon in the game! Where was I going to find a love like that? It wasn't just going to fall out of nowhere and land in my lap.

Come on, idiot brigade, we're in real trouble here!

An assembly of nobles, knights, and civil and military officials lined the edge of the room in neat rows. His Majesty wore a lopsided, enigmatic grin, seemingly in a better mood than usual.

"There are definitely a lot fewer people here this time," said the king.

Many of the knights and nobles had fled. We even had a dearth of soldiers, evidence of how hopeless the upcoming battle seemed. If I were just a common soldier, I would have run, too. Those left were either truly bold or had resolved to accept their fate.

"Nonetheless, those who have remained are true heroes!" the king went on. "Those principality cowards command a horde of monsters as they advance on our capital. Gentlemen, now is the time to put your lives on the line! To face off with our enemy, we must unite. Viscount Bartfort, step forward!"

I made my way down the red carpet and took a knee in front of His Majesty, bowing my head.

"Given the danger of our predicament, I hereby appoint you commander-in-chief. There are those here who would belittle you for your youth. I'm sure there are also those who distrust your lack of experience. However, only you possess the power to lead us to victory. Tell me, Viscount Bartfort, can you win?"

He said it so theatrically, like lines from a movie. Not that I disapproved. There was something appealing about the drama of it all. So I used a line I'd heard somewhere before: "If that is what Your Majesty desires, yes."

The crowd broke out into whispers.

"How dare a little runt like him…"

"Tsk, his words may be proper, but that's all he has going for him."

"Hmm, I'll give him seventy points for that reply."

"I feel like I've heard that line somewhere before…"

I'm embarrassed enough as it is, so you can keep your commentary to yourself! See, even the king looks pissed off! Wait…why does he look pissed off?

"I see, then." Queen Mylene's cheeks flushed. She looked happy for some reason? But why?

His Majesty continued, "Then with Viscount Bartfort as our commander-in-chief, we go forth to battle!"

A noble in extravagant dress—Marquess Frampton—rose to protest. He had heavy bags under his eyes, and his face was gaunt.

Well, that's not surprising. He sent out all those troops thinking the principality was his ally only for them to decimate our forces.

“Please, wait, Your Majesty! We cannot put our faith in an upstart like this. He was arrested for betraying the kingdom! And you’re asking us to fight under his command? Are you mocking us?”
Other nobles chimed in.
“He’s right. We should try negotiating with them first.”
“Please, leave the matter to me. I swear I will find a way to settle things with them.”
“Relying on the viscount would be an irreversible mistake!”
I stood and looked up at the king and queen. His Majesty just closed his eyes.
Meanwhile, Queen Mylene maintained a poker face as she declared,
“Enough, this is shameful! The viscount is no traitor. We established his crimes were fabrications. Moreover, His Majesty appointed the viscount. Do you intend to oppose your king?”
In other words, they were using the power of the king’s position to force the other nobles to accept my new appointment—or else. It was reckless, but we had no other choice.
Just as understandably, Marquess Frampton was desperate to resist the decision even so. If I really did become commander-in-chief, he knew that was the end for him. “Preposterous!” he said, face reddened with anger. “Queen or not, this behavior is unbecoming! Under no circumstance can we nobles fight under these conditions.”
I slowly turned my gaze toward the marquess, slipping a hand into my pocket. From it, I produced the handgun from earlier…
…and fired a shot at the ceiling. The echo of the blast was followed by the hollow clink of the empty shell falling to the floor.
At my signal, Duke Redgrave’s knights surrounded the marquess. I glanced at Mr. Vince, and he nodded. I had his permission to proceed. It was my time to shine.
“Shut your filthy mouth, you reeking pile of garbage,” I spat.
More guards swarmed forward, moving to arrest the nobles who had protested my appointment. In other words, Marquess Frampton’s faction.
“Wh-what?!” the marquess spluttered. “Guards! What is the meaning of this? Take this upstart away with all haste—wh-what are you doing?”
“You conspired with the principality to bring disaster on the kingdom. I’m not going to be arrested for treachery. You are.”
The guards bound the marquess’s arms and brought him to me.
“E-enough of this nonsense,” the marquess howled. “How dare you call me a traitor? I have only ever acted in the best interest of the kingdom! What would a child like you know?!”
“Hate to break it to ya, but this kid beat you. Oh, I won’t argue that I’m *not* young and inexperienced. But if middle-aged pillars of this country can’t outwit me, then you’re done for.”
You stepped right into my trap.

That said, I did empathize. They hadn't lost to me alone. Really, they'd lost to Luxion. Without him, I stood no chance. But if I really think about it, I wouldn't have been caught up in this power struggle if I hadn't met Luxion. I shook my head. Oh well. No sense dwelling on it.

"And what proof do you have of this so-called conspiracy? Your Majesty! This is a mistake. Please, don't let this vermin sway you with his falsehoods!"

The king didn't respond. He merely sat there, staring down at us all. Infuriated by His Majesty's inaction, the marquess pinned the queen with a glare. "This is your doing, isn't it? You're a cancer in this palace!"

He had some nerve speaking such disrespect.

"Marquess Frampton, how unsightly." Her Majesty gave him a pitying look. "You've lost."

He thrashed about, refusing to concede. "You have absolutely no *proof* of your accusations. I warn you, the heavens will punish you for this heinous act!"

The other nobles in his faction kicked up a fuss as well. Meanwhile, anyone not on his side either lacked all sympathy or was too confused to react.

This guy sure doesn't know when to give up. Amusing… I guess I'll play with him a bit.

"You want proof that badly?" I asked.

As I did, Luxion slipped out of the shadows and projected a three-dimensional video in the middle of the chamber floor. It displayed the marquess as well as his supporters.

There was a wave of shock in the crowd, but I raised my voice. "It really is too bad! I'm a nice person, so I was willing to forgive you if you agreed to fight alongside us, but you've let your last chance slip away, marquess."

Okay, that was a lie. Me, forgive him? Pfft, no.

"Wh-what are you talking about? Your Majesty! Please, stop this man. He has dared bring a gun into the audience chamber! He's dangerous, you cannot let him run unchecked! Don't allow yourself to be pulled in by his deception!"

Then the video began to play, and the recording drowned him out.

"Marquess! I just got word that the queen is recommending Bartfort be appointed commander-in-chief!"

"How pathetic, allowing herself to be cajoled by that lowlife. No matter how capable she seems, she's like every other female. His Majesty is an embarrassment for ever conceding to her whims. …Still, I didn't think the principality would break our agreement."

"We've lost many of our comrades. What should we do now?"

"Use Princess Hertrude as a bargaining chip. They must want her and the Magic Flute. Don't forget to push the other factions to favor our agreement with the principality. And don't let Bartfort get out of this alive. We might not have anticipated the principality's secret weapon, but Bartfort is no less

dangerous. If necessary, we'll offer them the king's life as reparations to the principality—or to the people, if they demand consequences."
In other words, they had planned to make His Majesty their scapegoat. *If that's not sedition, I don't know what is.*
In the audience chamber, Marquess Frampton blanched at his own recording. "I-It's a lie! Complete nonsense! This is just some illusion he's conjured. He's trying to lure us into a trap!"
I pressed the barrel of my gun against the marquess's forehead and smiled. "Are you an idiot? I've got you and your men in cuffs. The king and queen would never let me do all this if that were the only proof I had. Know why they're standing by and watching? The evidence I have is *overwhelming*." I took a letter from my pocket and threw it to the floor.
The marquess's eyes widened, and his entire body quivered. "H-how? I-I swear I burned that."
I didn't stop with the one. I had a number of letters, all in the marquess's handwriting, all correspondence with the principality. Luxion had done a good job copying his penmanship.
"Oh, and I have a message from Princess Hertrude as well. 'You were surprisingly useless,' she said. She was more than happy to share all the little details of your conversations."
Hertrude had already finished her business with Marquess Frampton, so she'd been willing to cooperate and spilled everything. From her perspective, the principality's victory was assured. Watching the kingdom bicker among themselves over who'd betrayed who was just icing on the cake for her. She probably thought we'd tear ourselves apart.
What a troublesome princess.
Marquess Frampton's face turned beet red. "That little witch!" he hissed.
The video continued to play, and in the recording, the marquess frowned.
"They're all clueless! The Saint may be a nuisance, but we can handle her. Bartfort is a different matter! He's as deadly as an entire fleet! Do they not understand what it means for him to take out ten vessels by himself?"
"But right now, isn't our problem the principality? We should cooperate with Duke Redgrave, and—"
"No. Pit Bartfort against him and have them destroy each other. Take Bartfort House as hostages. I don't care how you do it! Listen to me. You cannot underestimate him. He's no mere guard dog. His airship needs only a single crewman to pilot it. Do you know what that means? He's the real danger here!"
"Y-yes, but what we need right now—"
"Vince, that fool, what is he thinking?! If he lets that runt do whatever he likes, it will spell the end of the kingdom. Even if he beats the principality, what will it be for? We must crush Bartfort. We must get rid of him, no matter what!"
I snorted. Kinda makes you feel sorry for me, doesn't it, how he treats me like a terrifying monster?

If Marquess Frampton hadn’t interfered, I would have had no reason to move against him.
Huh. Come to think of it, hadn’t his group been operating behind the scenes in the game, too? It was thanks to them that the protagonist managed to gain prominence and rise up, right? Well, no sense in thinking about that now.
“All right,” I said, signaling Luxion to cut off the video. “Now do you understand? It’s your fault the kingdom is in this mess. Even you must realize you were straight-up traitors.”
“We were *not*,” Marquess Frampton snapped. “We did what we did for the good of the country. Who do you think has supported this nation until now? Me! I held everything together! What would vermin like you know?! I’ve only done what was necessary to let the kingdom survive!”
“But you landed us here, didn’t you? Your judgment’s way off. I wasn’t the real threat. It was the principality. If you’d dealt with them as you should have—”
“Ridiculous! You’re an ignorant child—do you even understand how much power you hold right now? You’ll destroy this kingdom, mark my words! Open your eyes, everyone! This brat will bring disaster to your door!”
Oh, come on, you’re giving me way too much credit.
I laughed. “Uh, no. The thing threatening to destroy the country right now is the *principality*. And you set them up to demolish the kingdom before I ever had a chance. Sorry, Gramps, you bungled this. You think you screwed us because you’re senile, maybe?”
He thrashed about, yanking at his bonds. “You brat! You know nothing! I’ve worked myself to the bone for this country!”
“You undermined an asset of the kingdom—me—and, again, the principality? Baying at our door? Your fault.”
“Everything would have worked out perfectly if you had just died! We don’t need your power. We could have won without it! The only reason the king and queen sit on their thrones is because of the work *I* did! I won’t allow a pipsqueak like you to deny my sacrifices. You’re nothing!”
“I think you have the wrong idea. I recognize everything you’ve done. I have no doubt you spent years doing an admirable job supporting this country. Yes, well done!” I gestured with animation. “You have my respect! You’re incredible!”
Everyone gaped at me.
I dropped my hands and turned my gun on Marquess Frampton once more.
“But now that you’ve failed,” I said, voice low, “you need to take responsibility for your actions.”
“F-failed?!”
“How many times do I have to say it? *You* caused this war. *You* left us vulnerable. So *you* need to take the blame. That’s your job.”
“I-I’m a marquess!”

“Great, cool. Quite the impressive title. And it means you’re in the perfect position to be held accountable. Don’t worry, you’re lucky—you have a successor like me. I’ll fix everything you screwed up.” I grinned. *Your real mistake was pissing me off.*
“And what can you do, runt? You talk big, but—”
“You still don’t get it? Let me spell it out. You *lost*. Now we’re going to sacrifice you and your coconspirators for the good of the country. You tried to make a pawn of me for personal gain. Heck, I’m not even mad—not about that. I just want you to own up to it.”
“Wh-what do you—”
“Let’s be honest, this isn’t the first time you’ve stepped on the weak to do your so-called job. How many people have you and your cronies crushed for the sake of power?”
He sneered. “Necessary sacrifices! What’s wrong with that? You’re so useless. You don’t understand the political world at all!”
I almost wanted to compliment him for how well he played his role. *Sacrifice the few to save many.* What a truly wonderful principle! Sure, the world didn’t look favorably on that idea, but I couldn’t dismiss it out of hand. “Gramps, I already told you, I’m not discounting your resumé. In fact, I agree with your world view. Weaklings *should* be cut off. Let’s sacrifice a few if it’ll save the majority! And now, I hope, you understand what I’m saying.”
“You basta—what are you—gurgh!”
I shoved the barrel of the gun into his mouth. “You don’t have to talk anymore, weakling. Accept that you and your faction are the losers who need to be cut off. Be happy you get to offer yourselves up for the rest of us. You’re not going to complain, are you?”
His face went deathly pale, but he shook his head. With the gun in his mouth, he couldn’t speak properly.
“You just told me you sacrificed countless people because it was so ‘necessary’ for the kingdom. You had free rein to do whatever you wanted for the ‘kingdom’s sake.’ Surely you aren’t going to contradict yourself after all of that. Not when it’s your turn to be the sacrifice.”
I slid the muzzle out of his mouth and then slammed my fist into his face. He went flailing back, his nose broken and blood spraying everywhere.
“You can spend the rest of your time atoning for your crimes.” I motioned to the guards. “Take him away.”
“Y-yes, sir!”
Once the traitorous aristocrats were all dragged out, only a few nobles remained. Those involved with the military watched me closely.
“Now that you’re all aware I was falsely accused,” I said, “there are a few things I want to make perfectly clear. For one, I hate all of you. I hate this country. I have to clean up a mess caused by your stupidity, but I expect you to pull your own weight!”

They glared daggers at me. No doubt they had a lot to say, but I didn't care to hear it. They were at the center of the nation's politics, weren't they? What had they been doing this whole time?

Come to think of it, Japan had these same issues. Even so, my previous country was better than Holfort Kingdom. Ugh, I wanted to go back… Life had definitely been easier in my previous world.

"And two, I know you don't trust me. I don't trust you either. I'll keep number three simple—if one of you thinks you can successfully turn the tide, step forward. I'd happily trade places."

They all averted their gaze. Clearly, they weren't satisfied with me in command, but none of them were stupid enough to volunteer in my stead. I was no charismatic Prince Julius. Even I'd be pissed if you said someone like me was going to be in charge.

"Finally—follow my orders and we'll win. If you're not going to obey me, run away now." My voice boomed over their outrage. "Throw down your doubt! Understand? Fight and die for me! In return, I'll save this kingdom!"

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After our little pep rally, I cradled my head in my hands, tucked away in a room the palace servants had prepared for me.

"This freakin' sucks!"

"Isn't it a bit late for that?" Luxion said, facing me. The two of us were going over materials and resources, determining how to organize the kingdom's forces. "*You* volunteered. Although, I suppose I am impressed you said all that. Did you not also underestimate the principality? I suspect if you'd done a better job navigating the prior situation, it would never have come to this."

"Oh, shut up. Was it really on *me* to handle that anyway?"

"Well, the lack of turnout in our forces does partly owe itself to your behavior. It really is impressive how you manage to rig the odds against yourself. A sublime talent, even. For that, you have my respect."

All things considered, this kingdom was done for whether I became commander-in-chief or not. We were short on people—horrifically short.

"The evacuation is our top priority," I decided. "The nobles who don't want to fight under me can help clear out the villages and towns in the principality's path. We need to evacuate the capital, too."

"And you're even willing to reduce your already lackluster army? Very well, I will prepare the necessary paperwork." Luxion turned to a printer-like device he'd prepared and began copying down my orders.

"What's the situation with the principality's army?" I asked.

"They continue to encroach, albeit slowly; we still have some time until they arrive."

I snatched up the printed documents and scribbled my signature on them. "I'm sending your main body into battle as well."

“Fine, but our communication network is unstable. With a continent between us, I probably won’t be able to contact you. My support capabilities will be reduced to the bare minimum. I recommend against this.”
“Do it anyway.”
“Very well.” He paused. “The marquess was a capable man.”
“Huh?” I looked at him quizzically.
“I commend his ability to identify the real threat. He chose *my* master over Marie and the principality,” Luxion boasted. “No doubt he knew the lore of the royal family’s ship as well, and considered your similar assets a significant danger to his plans.”
In the game, the protagonist ended up getting her hands on the royal family’s ship, a Lost Item that had played an essential role in the founding of the kingdom. The *Partner* was the same type of Lost Item, so I couldn’t entirely blame the marquess for being wary.
“Still, if he’d really known what he was doing, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”
“The same could be said for you, Master. Through me, you possess overwhelming power, and though you desire neither the rank nor the status you’ve acquired, you still threw us into the midst of this mess. You have no right to deride the marquess.”
Ugh. Where in the world had I gone so wrong?
I resigned myself to continuing to sign the paperwork that would make my strategy a reality.

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Once that stage of planning was tended to, we headed for a storage area deep below the royal palace. A beautiful white airship lay hidden there, its streamlined shape resembling Luxion’s main body, though its design was far more intricate.
“It’s enormous.”
“Four hundred meters,” Luxion cut in, “which makes it smaller than the *Partner*.”
“It looks strong, though.”
“It’s nothing compared to the *Partner*.”
I paused. “Its design is nice.”
“It certainly ignores efficiency and maintenance concerns in favor of extravagance. And it certainly can’t beat the simple and beautiful functionality of the *Partner*.”
Perhaps Luxion felt a bit competitive.
I surveyed the gathered. Mechanics responsible for servicing the royal family’s ship stood to one side. A disgruntled king stood on the other side, next to an exasperated Queen Mylene. The five jerkheads maintained their silence as Marie awkwardly lurked near them. The only others present were Angie and Livia. Angie was here because of her connection to the royal family, but I had dragged Livia along.

“Your familiar seems to enjoy bragging about your ship,” His Majesty said, his tone barbed.
Cold sweat trickled down my forehead. “Uh, well, he’s a bit of a sore loser. Anyway! Why don’t we go inside? He can make any repairs we need, and we should be able to get the ship in the air.”
“That won’t be possible.”
“Huh?”
His Majesty pointed to a device in front of the ship. A sheet draped over the apparatus, but at the king’s order, the mechanics yanked it away. Beneath was a heart-shaped stage surrounded by a heart-shaped background. It looked entirely out of place.
“When two people who truly love each other stand on the stage, the ship will recognize them as its owner. Only then can its power be wielded. If the ship recognizes no one, the door won’t open.”
I don’t think this was in the game… As far as I knew, the protagonist and her love interest came searching for the ship and it automatically reacted to them.
His Majesty’s voice filled with emotion. “Here we stand, the royal Holfort line, its branch family, Marmoria House, as well as Field House, Arclight House and Seberg House—all descendants of our kingdom’s heroes. It must be fate that you’re all here.”
Ah, pretty sure I heard this in the game.
All five of the love interests had heroic ancestors who had formed an adventuring party prior to the kingdom’s founding. That was why these five, thanks to their bloodlines, were qualified to access the royal family’s ship. There had, however, been a sixth person in the heroes’ party—a female adventurer whose name had been lost to time. As far as I remembered, she was supposed to be Livia’s ancestor.
Pretty sure she was the first Saint or something like that.
I hadn’t really been interested in the story’s lore, so I’d pretty much skipped over those scenes, grumbling, *Yeah, yeah. Fate this, fate that. Whatever*. Now I regretted not reading it in more depth. It wasn’t like I’d thought at the time, *Better cram all the knowledge of this game while I can! You never know, I might reincarnate in this crap world one day.*
“The royal family’s ship only recognizes the royal family and the heroic descendants,” the king declared proudly, sniffing at me. “No one else is qualified to take command.”
Does he have something against me? All I did was beat the snot out of his kid and try to seduce his wife. Ah, wait…
“Master,” Luxion whispered, “if I destroyed the door, we could enter the vessel with ease, but I assume we should play along. What do you think?”
Well, seeing as we still needed the love to end all loves to win this stupid game…if we had a device for quantifying people’s feelings, I figured we should use it.

I nodded to Luxion and approached the apparatus. The closer I got, the cornier it looked. The tacky heart-shaped stage thing was downright gauche.
Queen Mylene looked to us, her expression somber. “Are you ready? This device isn’t as innocent as it looks.” Beside her, the king suddenly went quiet. “Well, my king? We should go first to show them how to use it.”
He bobbed his head. “Uh, yeah. I’m sure we’ll be able to move it this time!” He shrank back when she shot him a glare.
The two mounted the stage, coming to stand on either side of a heart with a line running through its middle. The stage began to light up, blue where the king was standing, and red where the queen stood—no, pink? Well, whatever. It was glowing and stuff.
A voice called out, “For the man, twenty-five points! For the woman, fifty-eight points! Too bad!”
Huh…?
Everyone on the floor exchanged confused looks.
Up on the stage, Queen Mylene threw herself at the king and started beating her fists against his chest.
Aw, that’s kinda adorable.
“You liar! Only twenty-five points? What’s up with that? You think I’m some stranger? A mere acquaintance?!”
“Sh-shut up!” he sputtered, absolutely pathetic. “What about you? You only have fifty-eight points! It’s not like you love me either! You know what, fine! Okay? I don’t see you as a woman anymore! What’s wrong with that?!”
The two continued to squabble, and finally, I understood the significance of this contraption.
“So it measures your feelings for each other and reports them?”
Luxion’s eyeball moved up and down, nodding. “Seems almost like a prank device. I managed to remotely access the royal family’s ship and it appears a wealthy couple made it on a whim, though the ship itself was constructed quite some time before my main body. From what I gather, they used it once on a honeymoon before storing it away here.”
That was so bizarre I struggled to respond. *Seriously? That’s the reason it was made?*
Not that anyone would believe you if you tried to claim this legendary vessel was actually an ancient cruise ship.
“Incidentally, that couple divorced two years later,” Luxion continued.
“I didn’t really need to know that, now did I? Ugh, let’s just get this over with. We know what to do now. Someone just needs to step up to the plate so we can get this ship moving. Hopefully.”
No matter how you tried to spin it, though, Marie’s relationship with her boy toys was fractured beyond repair. The royal family’s vessel would remain useless if we left it up to them.
“It will be effective in battle if you can get it up in the air, that much is clear,” said Luxion. “It’s equipped with multiple armaments, and it’s far

more powerful than the other airships of this world. Though it will require some repairs."
The exterior looked pristine, but no one had ever been able to get inside, so the interior apparently wanted a fair bit of tuning up. It was like a car that had been left sitting for years.
I sighed. "If we can't find anyone who fits the bill, we'll destroy the door and go inside. I guess."
"Very well," said Luxion, "I'll send for some repair bots. They will arrive in about ten minutes."
It would be a godsend if we got the ship to recognize a couple before then. And even if we did break in, the ship required "true love" to fulfill its true potential… Argh! What a mess.
"Marie, come!"
"Huh? What?!"
Prince Julius snatched Marie's hand and yanked her onto the stage. His parents were still bickering, but he shoved them off to make way.
Personally, I would have been shocked to discover my parents didn't love one another, but His Highness seemed too concerned with Marie to pay them any mind.
Once again, the apparatus powered up and began its measurements. At last, it blurted out the same phrases with new data. "For the man, ninety points! For the woman, seventeen points! What an extremely disappointing result!"
That thing sure couldn't read the room. I supposed not every AI could be as sophisticated as Luxion.
Marie stared down at her feet. Prince Julius, on the other hand, smiled. Was he relieved to know the truth or something?
"If this is the result…" he said as he turned to her, "I accept it. Marie, allow me to proclaim here and now—one day, I will make you fall in love with me."
Excuse? He was going to make a woman who had never actually loved him fall for him? That was pretty twisted considering he'd given up Angie for that deceitful jerk.
I glanced at Angie—I wanted to know if she was okay—but her nose had wrinkled in disgust. Well, as long as she wasn't pissed.
Prince Julius stepped off the platform, leaving Marie behind. Before she could leave, Jilk moved forward to take his place.
"For the man, eighty-nine points! For the woman, twelve points! What a truly tragic outcome."
Did you really need to add that last bit?!
Marie's face contorted with discomfort.
"It's aggravating that I lost to the prince," Jilk said gently, "but I won't give up either. Miss Marie, I swear I will make you fall for me."
"Jilk…"
Greg was the next one on the platform. "Move outta the way. It's my turn. Marie, now I'm gonna show you how I feel!"

“For the man, ninety-one points! For the woman, twenty-two points! It’s a one-sided love. Give up now.”
Knock it off with the commentary, you’re not helping!
Greg smiled helplessly. “That’s rough. But I feel kinda relieved. Marie, you get how I feel about you, right? I’m not gonna quit here.”
“Greg, um, you know…” she started to say.
“I’m next.” Brad proudly waltzed up and took Greg’s place as he hopped off.
“For the man, ninety-eight points! For the woman, nine points. It’s almost incredible how mismatched your feelings are.”
Stop. I can’t watch this anymore. Mainly because my stomach hurt so bad from trying to hold in my laughter.
“That was the lowest, wasn’t it?” Brad sighed.
“I—I’m sorry, really. But I—”
“That just means the real work starts now. I’m going to aim to be your number one, Marie. We realized, you know. You were just trying to push us away before.”
Oh boy, what have the five of them decided this time?
After switching places with Brad, Chris added, “I admit, we haven’t been very reliable, but…you’re all we have, Marie.”
Uh, no, seriously. There’s a bunch of other girls who want to be with you dummies. Open your eyes.
“For the man, eighty-seven points. For the woman, thirty-one points! Is it just me, or is this woman’s heart stone-cold?”
Marie burst into tears. “No, this is all wrong, everyone. Listen to me!”
Prince Julius approached and took her hand, guiding her off the stage. “We know. It’s sad to admit, but we weren’t able to protect you. It’s no wonder you’re fed up with us. When you needed us the most, we weren’t there for you.”
That is one heck of a misunderstanding. I wish they could have had that same compassion before meeting Marie.
“Don’t worry, Marie. We won’t leave you again.”
“No! I’m telling you guys, listen to me!” Marie tried desperately to be heard. But the boys seemed intent on dismissing her.
I didn’t really care about them and their relationship problems, but I felt like an idiot for ever expecting them to be able to activate the royal family’s ship. What now, though? I scanned the people in the room.
“See the high numbers Julius and the other boys had?” Queen Mylene scolded the king. “When I first met you, you didn’t even have forty points to give me.”
“You expected love from a political marriage? I wanted to marry someone I loved too, you know!”
“You promised me you would raise the number! You swore we’d be able to pilot this thing together and go on adventures someday!”
“I was lying!” he snapped. “Obviously!”

“All you ever do is put on an act! That’s how it’s always been. As long as you get to be the star of the show and soak up all the attention, that’s all that matters! You’re nothing but a big phony!”
Their relationship was pretty clearly beyond salvation. It just went to show it was just as Her Majesty had said: this was no innocent toy. The device had truly devastating effects.
The things she accused the king of were pretty disappointing as well. Not that I hadn’t suspected as much. From the moment I met the guy, I’d thought there was something disingenuous about him.
Actually, I wasn’t ever really deceived. I *definitely* saw through him!
But while I wanted to protect the country, I couldn’t do anything about the king and queen’s personal relationship. I turned to Livia and Angie, who’d been standing quietly by.
“Eh, you know how it is,” I said. “Love is complex. Well, I guess we better get back. We can just leave the rest to Luxion… Hey, what are you two doing?”
The two of them latched onto my arms, one on each side. Normally, it wouldn’t have been half-bad—they were both beautiful—but they dragged me toward the platform. And they were a lot stronger than I’d anticipated.
“Wait! Please, seriously, wait! I don’t wanna. I don’t wanna get up on that corny stage!” I shook my head and struggled, but they hauled me toward it anyway.
“Leon, please just get up there!”
“We’re going to settle this once and for all. You keep dodging the topic, but if we use this device, you won’t be able to lie about your feelings!”
“No! This kinda thing is only fun when you’re watching. I definitely don’t want to participate! I don’t have the mental strength. I’m *delicate*. If the results are bad, I won’t be able to take it!”
I’d only been able to laugh at the guys because I never thought I’d do it! Angie wanted to “settle things,” which I had no doubt meant the two of them wanted to measure how much I cared about them. If the numbers turned out to be high, it would be embarrassing. Worse, if they turned out to be low, I’d succumb to self-loathing, wondering why my feelings for them were so cheap. It’d be one thing if the results were private, but the stupid device would report the results immediately. Worst case, it would end badly for all of us.
I didn’t want that. I wouldn’t know how to face them anymore.
“Come on, you guys, measuring love with numbers is just weird! It’s wrong!”
Luxion watched me, amused. “So it was fine when other people did it, but you don’t want to? Makes me question your humanity.”
You stupid AI, how dare you betray your master!
“Stop! Seriously, I won’t be able to handle it! *And* I won’t be able to laugh at the other guys anymore! I just wanted to mock everyone else’s misery without tasting it myself!”

As I shrieked, Prince Julius and the others made their way over to the stage. The king put a hand on my shoulder and grinned. “Please, it would be boring if you didn’t take part. Besides, your snickering face was pissing me off. Get on the platform!”
With him and the boys pushing me, we made it right to the very edge of the device. I dug my heels in and resisted. Livia and Angie got on the stage, each of them yanking at my arms, trying to drag me up.
“Leon, it will only take a few seconds,” Livia urged.
“Get your butt up here and let’s settle this!” Angie snapped.
Prince Julius and Marie shoved me from behind.
“Bartfort, steel yourself and get it over with!” he cried.
“Yeah, get up there!” she yelled.
“You traitors won’t get away with this! I will remember this day, I swear it! Ah, wait!”
As I tried desperately to fight them off, the stage began flashing pink and blared a musical fanfare. Then the royal family’s ship hummed as the engine came to life, echoing through the room.
“For both girls, one hundred and twenty points! Congratulations! You are tied by bonds of true love!”
Suddenly, everyone released me, and I stumbled back. The only two people on the stage were Angie and Livia.
“Angie…”
“Livia, you…”
They blushed in embarrassment as they gazed into each other’s eyes. Individually, they reached out, looping their hands around each other’s waists. Barely a hair’s breadth remained between them.
“I-I’m so happy,” said Livia.
“Me, too.”

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Everyone else stared at them, mouths agape.
“Well, the machine never did discriminate against same-sex couples. I suppose this is one way of doing it,” said Luxion.
I slid to the floor. Honestly, I had kind of expected me and the girls to pull bigger numbers than Marie and her lovers. I’d never thought I’d end up as tragic.
I’d also never realized how Angie and Livia felt, not until I saw how they gazed at one another. I was conflicted—conflicted as *hell*. They were both gorgeous women and my friends, but I had no idea they were actually into each other, like, *that* way. Part of me was glad they weren’t both falling for another guy, but another part of me was so sad and disappointed I was on the verge of tears.
“So I really am just a comic relief background character! I guess I never had any hope to begin with, did I?!”
Queen Mylene placed a hand on my shoulder. “Um, look, I don’t really know what to say, but…try not to be too down, okay?”
I burst into tears and fled the scene. “This is too cruel!”
“Leon!” Her Majesty called.

Chapter 8:
Into Battle

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, watching from the palace rooftop as the sun climbed higher in the sky. The cool breeze washed over me and woke me up. Airships had come and gone from the capital throughout the night, continuing to evacuate civilians.

"Master, the *Partner*'s preparations are complete," Luxion announced.

"And that means I'm ready." The city was in a state of confusion. "I hope things go the way we've planned."

"As the Giants near, the disruption of our communication network will continue to worsen," said Luxion. "Once my main body makes it beneath the continent, I will be able to provide only the bare minimum of support. Are you certain you wish to do this?"

In short, when Luxion's floating auxiliary body lost connection with the main ship, its performance abilities would be severely reduced. The Giant's interference with our networks had also made reconnaissance nearly impossible now. We had no idea where the principality's forces were, or how fast they were moving, only that the Giant continued to inexorably make its way toward the capital. I had sent some capital airships to scout ahead, but with their scaled-down resources, there was a limit to what they could do.

"Livia and Angie are here, too," I said. "I'll be fine. With the power of their love, we'll blast that monster into oblivion."

"Love, you say? If that really is enough to win this battle, then why does the rest of the world continue to suffer despite the prevalence of the emotion?"

I shrugged. "How would I know? We can think about that after we win."

"Yet you've been avoiding those two, haven't you?"

Well, now I knew they loved each other. They didn't need me flailing about and getting in their way. "I was just shocked; I didn't know what to say."

"I heard they looked for you after you fled."

"It's not like I'm avoiding them just because of that stupid stage," I muttered. "I just don't want to see them right now." We were going to war. I had to steel myself for what was to come. "I might lose my nerve if I see them."

"If only you had been honest about that to begin wi—Master!" Luxion's eye turned up toward the sky.

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The tea master prepared tea in one of the palace rooms, despite the early hour, serving two women seated across from each other. Tension filled the air between the queen and the princess.

“Princess Hertrude, can’t I convince you to stop this war?” Queen Mylene asked.
“Impossible.” Hertrude waved her hand dismissively, though she wore a faint smile. “The principality has awaited this day for decades. Now it’s your turn to feel the pain of being trampled under another nation.”
Mylene closed her eyes. “I understand you want to blame the kingdom, however—”
“Oh? Are you going to threaten me? It’s too late. My sister has already summoned the Sky and Sea Guardians. Once she gives the order, they won’t stop until they complete their task. There is nothing left to do.”
In other words, the kingdom couldn’t use Hertrude as a hostage; she would buy them nothing. But the queen shook her head. She placed an aged document and book on the table.
“And what are these?” Hertrude asked.
“Read this first please.” The queen gestured to the document.
It had been written shortly after the principality gained its independence, listing demands for reparation in exchange for acts of brutality—not the kingdom’s but the principality’s.
“Th-these are a lie. The kingdom treated us unfairly. That’s why we fought for our independence! This is fake!”
“I see they filled your head with propaganda,” Queen Mylene said bitterly. “You make a fine puppet, Princess.”
The book described the history of the kingdom and the principality. The principality’s king, a former archduke of Holfort Kingdom, had turned hostile toward his motherland and attacked it from his territory numerous times. His forces plundered and pillaged without mercy. With his enormous military power, he backed his former kingdom into a corner. It should have been a simple matter to crush him and his house, but Holfort Kingdom was already surrounded by numerous enemies. They couldn’t afford to go into all-out war. Instead, they appointed Field House to protect the border between the kingdom and the archduke’s territory.
“We built military facilities, rounded up airships, and transformed the floating island at the border into a stronghold. It took an enormous amount of money and materials,” said the queen.
Infuriated, Holfort Kingdom treated the archduke’s house as an enemy nation rather than a subject. Field House also exerted pressure to keep them in check. The archduke gathered his forces to mount one last attack, turning his cannons on inhabited islands in order to steal their Suspension Stones. Suspension Stones were a necessary resource for building airships, and the archduke showed no compunction in destroying people’s lands to acquire them. Incensed by this, Field House and the kingdom moved in, at last defeating Fanoss’s forces. The document Hertrude had in her hands detailed the reparations for raiding that the Principality of Fanoss had promised to pay in exchange for its independence.

“Still, the principality continued to attack,” Her Majesty went on. “With the earl of Field House protecting the border, we suffered fewer casualties, but resentment lived on in people’s hearts. When the principality invaded, they destroyed the land our people had lived on.” Mylene wouldn’t claim that the kingdom had behaved with perfect equanimity, but Hertrude needed to know this truth. “Your countrymen are invaders.”
“No! We only fought for independence. Because you forced an unfair treaty on us!”
“We only demanded reparation for the damage you caused. Now you’re going to blame the kingdom for your resultant financial struggles?”
Hertrude’s cheeks burned red, and she snatched up her cup.
The tea master moved swiftly to stop her. “I’m afraid your tea has grown cold. Allow me to pour you a fresh cup.”
Vexed by his interference, she glowered at him.
Mylene raised her voice to draw the princess’s attention back to her. “You have an obligation to know the facts. Yes, the kingdom raided your homeland as well, but you cannot forget the principality’s role in instigating the conflict.”
Hertrude knitted her brows in confusion, but a siren blared suddenly. An intruder had entered the palace.
Mylene left her seat. “They’re earlier than we expected.”
The tea master turned his gaze to the window and then glanced at Hertrude. “Are they here to rescue the princess?”
“Most likely. We cannot afford it. They must not get their hands on the other Magic Flute. Where is Leon?”
“He’s already set off with the *Partner*. I’m sure he’ll move to intercept them. He’s a most reliable ally.”
Hertrude trembled, dropping her gaze to the floor, as yet unable to accept the truth.
“Ah, pardon me.” The tea master yanked the two women to the ground.
An explosion echoed overhead.

***

Arroganz landed on the palace rooftop, and I clambered into the cockpit. Once there, Luxion gave me his report. “They caught us off guard. A surprise aerial attack.”
“Yeah, and your radar sucks.”
“I told you the disruption of our network would worsen. You should praise me for noticing the attack before it hit. The *Partner* will commence an emergency takeoff.”
The *Partner* shot out ahead to protect the skies over the capital. I grasped the controls inside Arroganz and soared up above the rooftops. A siren blared from the palace.
“How many ships?”

“Thirty,” Luxion said. “It’s a detachment force. They’re dropping bombs as they descend.”
“Take them down.”
The *Partner* shot a barrage of rounds to intercept the enemy’s missiles. Explosions lit up the sky, black smoke swallowing the palace. The clear, beautiful morning became suddenly overcast, shrouded with darkness.
“Master, the kingdom’s army is requesting orders. The counterattack force’s launch is delayed.”
“Tell them to prioritize evacuations. You and I will have to take care of things until more of our allies can get up in the air.”
“The enemy has deployed land forces and Armors as well.”
All the more reason to be quick up here. I squeezed the controls and snatched a rifle from the container on Arroganz’s back. As enemy Armors hurtled toward me, Luxion intercepted their feeds. The static made it difficult to discern what they said.
“There he is! The Fiendish Knight!”
“Commander, that huge Armor is on trajectory with us—rapid approach!”
I took aim at their leader and pulled the trigger.
“Don’t worry. He’s a coward. Hasn’t killed a single—huh?”
The bullet tore through the enemy Armor’s stomach. The ensuing explosion panicked the survivors.
“Commander!”
“I thought he didn’t kill?!”
I readjusted my grip on the controls, fine-tuning my aim. *Who said I didn’t kill?* I hadn’t last time, sure, but the situation hadn’t warranted it. Now we were in full-out war, and I didn’t have the luxury of holding back.
“You drove me into a corner,” I grumbled. “Don’t blame me for this.”
As they returned fire, I dodged. Not that I had to; Arroganz’s armored plating could deflect their bullets.
I whipped out a battle-axe, chopping into one of the Armors flying past. As another approached, I slammed Arroganz’s foot into it to gain some distance, then aimed my rifle at the engine of a descending airship. I pulled the trigger. A slight pause. Then the entire vessel exploded.
I watched them through my monitor. “Ugh, this is awful. Absolutely sucks. If you guys hadn’t come, I wouldn’t have to do this!”
“Arguably, you also wouldn’t have had to fight if you’d run away,” Luxion pointed out dutifully.
“And that would have been even worse, which is why I’m fighting! I hate the kingdom, but I hate the principality even more! Even wallowing in all that stupid marriage stuff was way better than this!”
I fought back nausea. My fingers trembled against the trigger as more enemy units closed in, headed straight for me.
“Stop that bastard!”
“You disgusting fiend!”
“Don’t face the Fiendish Knight by yourself! Attack simultaneously!”

Who are you calling a fiend?! You're the barbarians here—making me do this! I grit my teeth. "Enough of your misplaced resentment, morons!"
I shot another one down and then turned my gun on a second airship.

***

With the sky above the capital turned into a battlefield, Julius raced down a corridor within the palace. As he passed a corridor, he ran into his foster brother already clad in a pilot suit. "Jilk!"
Jilk ran to meet him. "Your Highness! I'm glad to see you safe."
Julius stared out a window, tormented. "What are these principality bastards thinking? Why would they send a detachment to the palace now?"
He found it odd they had no monsters. And they'd only come with a few dozen ships.
"They must be here to retrieve Princess Hertrude and the Magic Flute."
Julius slammed his fist against the wall. "What is Bartfort doing?!"
"He's left to intercept them. Please, Your Highness, you should fall back to a safe location."
"Don't be absurd. I'm going, too!"
In the midst of this exchange, Mylene, Hertrude, and Leon's tea master came hurrying down the corridor, accompanied by bodyguards.
"You will *not*." The queen's tone was sharp.
"Mother?" Julius couldn't just stand by and watch, he couldn't bear it. "I have to go with everyone else. But you should evacuate."
"Julius, you lack the power to fight them. Besides, it's your duty to survive."
"Jilk and my friends will be fighting! Are you telling me to run?!"
"Yes," she said, her expression cold. "That's exactly what I'm telling you to do. Running is all you *can* do."
"I'm not asking you to give me an airship. Just one Armor—"
"Julius, we have requisitioned no Armor for you to use."
Julius balled his hands into fists. "Then why are you letting Jilk out?!"
After all, Jilk didn't possess his own Armor either.
"I requested one from my house, and they sent it," Jilk said. "The other three did the same. Your Highness, please, let us handle things from here."
Julius shook his head in disbelief. "Why are you betraying me like this?! Didn't we agree to work together? Was that all a lie? We said we'd protect Marie!"
Jilk dropped his gaze.
Mylene interceded. "Julius, the palace's Armors and airships are all in use. You *can't* fight. Now behave and come with us so we can evacuate."
"I-I'm pretty sure Duke Redgrave has some extra Armors on his airship," Julius protested. "I heard he was recruiting more knights. If I go to him, certainly he'll—"

“Did you forget your insult to Duke Redgrave? His house no longer supports you, Julius. Jilk, the principality’s forces are descending. Please hurry to intercept them.”
“Yes, Your Majesty! I’ll be off, Your Highness.”
“Luck be with you,” the queen said as Jilk started down the hall.
Julius watched for a few moments and then sped off on his own.

***

Angie pulled Livia by the hand, racing down the hallway as confusion swept over the palace. Livia anxiously glanced out a window in their flight. “I can’t believe we didn’t notice them until they were already here.”
“The static in our channels has gotten worse. If Luxion couldn’t anticipate them, then we had no hope of knowing. At any rate, we need to get to the royal family’s ship.” Angie glanced out a window as well, catching sight of the *Partner*. For now, it protected the skies on its own.
Where is Leon?
The moment the royal family’s ship had accepted Angie and Livia as its owner, Leon had disappeared. Judging from what others had said, he was down in the dumps, but she and Livia had been too busy to track him down.
Luxion’s robot minions had arrived shortly after the kerfuffle with the love detector. They’d filed in through the ship’s now open door and commenced maintenance operations.
Livia glanced at her feet. “Do you think he was upset with us for being so excited about our scores?”
“N-no, I’m sure that wasn’t it. Well, part of the fault does lie with us, but I didn’t think he’d disappear without giving us a chance to apologize.”
Cannon fire and explosions echoed overhead; it was no time to reminisce. My father and brother aren’t here either. This was the worst possible timing.
The duke had left three guard ships for Angie’s protection. They were currently patrolling the skies, but if the need arose, they had been set to evacuate her.
Suddenly, Julius appeared up ahead, his shoulders hunched forward, gasping for air as he stared out a window. He looked up at their approach and then started toward Angie.
“Your Highness, what are you doing here?” she asked him. “You need to escape. Now!”
He dropped his head in a bow. “Angelica, I have a favor to ask. Lend me what power you have at your disposal—lend me the duke’s fleet.”
Livia glanced between them in confusion, unable to follow this abrupt development,
Angie’s eyes widened for a moment, but she soon regained her composure. “Those three ships are here to protect me. They aren’t my subordinates.

They only take orders from my father or brother. They might answer to Leon now, but either way, I can't honor your request."
"Just one Armor is enough. I don't want to be a coward who runs." He bowed his head again, pleading.
"No, Your Highness," Angie firmly rebuffed him. "Please, evacuate with us."
Julius lifted his chin. "Do you hate me for betraying your feelings? Is that why you won't help me?"
At these words, Angie realized something. It's strange, but…I don't feel any such thing toward him…not anymore.
Her concern for Leon far outweighed any lingering desire for revenge. More than anything, she just wanted to see Leon's face again.
"Not so long ago, I really did hate you. But now I…I love Leon. I don't resent you, Your Highness. Not anymore." She smiled.
Julius stared at her for a moment, as if captivated. His mouth opened, but before he got the chance to say anything, her family's knights found her and raced over.
"My lady, there you are!"
"We're headed underground," Angie instructed them. "Bring the prince."
"Yes, miss!" They surrounded Julius, guiding him and the girls to the storage area beneath the palace.
Livia squeezed Angie's hand. "Are you okay? I, uh, um…"
"Don't worry. I'm fine. All of those feelings…they're of the past." Angie smiled again.
Julius stared down at his feet.
Livia glanced at him. "Is something the matter?"
"I'd never seen her smile like that. That's all." His voice was full of self-derision.
Angie barely heard this remark, too otherwise concerned to care. *Leon, you have to come home to us.*

***

Gelatt stood on the bridge of a principality airships, staring down at the kingdom's capital from high above.
"And I even requested our surprise attack forces for this mission! I was so sure you wouldn't interfere, Fiendish Knight! But you're going to get in my way again?!"
Hadn't the kingdom's nobles arrested Leon? Gelatt hadn't anticipated his presence. He panicked at the sight of Arroganz on the field. It was said only Leon could control Arroganz and the *Partner*—which meant that Leon was free.
He chewed on his thumbnail. "But I have to retrieve the Magic Flute before our primary force arrives!"

The main army was keeping to the Sky Guardian's pace. They had summoned it from their own capital and its movement speed was so slow, so they had yet to arrive.
"We need the other flute to summon the Land Guardian. We can't afford to lose it…"
Notably, he had been granted these thirty airships under the pretense of saving Hertrude—Hertrauda would not have approved it otherwise. However, Gelatt didn't much care what happened to the captured princess. But so long as the second flute remained in enemy hands, his future was precarious.
"Earl, twenty ships have already gone down," a nearby soldier reported. "Our Armors are also falling."
"You think I can't see that for myself?! That bastard has no knightly pride, abandoning his conviction not to kill so easily! At this rate, if he comes after our ship I'll… No, I can't die here!"
Gelatt hastily called for a retreat. But it was too late. Arroganz suddenly loomed in front of the bridge.
"So this is your flagship, huh?" said a voice projected from the gray suit. Staring down the barrel of a giant rifle, Gelatt slapped his hands over his face. "Not here! I can't die heeeeere!"
Missiles launched from the container on Arroganz's back and slammed into the airship. Then Arroganz pulled the rifle trigger, and it was all over.

***

Clarice was at one of the evacuation centers in the capital, directing civilians onto airships personally owned by Atlee House. Civilians hurriedly piled inside, terrified of the principality's relentless attacks.
Knights and soldiers struggled and failed to hold the enemy forces at bay behind barricades. Even academy students on airbikes engaged the enemy. The horrific sounds of battle raged on land and in the air.
Clarice watched helplessly as enemies destroyed the Armor that had been guarding her. She might have surrendered for the sake of the civilians under her care, but the hostile Armors then began attacking her airships. Panicked, she snatched up a microphone and bellowed, "Wait! These aren't military ships! There are civilians on board!"
"Like that matters," an enemy Armor shouted back. "You kingdom savages will pay for your crimes with your lives!"
She grit her teeth. "How is that an excuse to commit atrocity? The same ones you accuse us of!"
Axe in hand, the Armor chopped right through the metal plating of the ship, cracking the ceiling above Clarice. He pried the hull open and reached in, cackling. "There's a girl in here! She's a noble, too!"
Cold sweat trickled down her back. Clarice knew exactly what happened to women who were captured on the battlefield.

One of her crew fired a rifle at the Armor's approaching hand, but the suit's metal plating deflected the bullets.
"Your tiny bullets won't do anything. Now, atone for your sins with your body!"
The moment the Armor's hand was about to close around Clarice, the enemy was violently ripped away from the airship.
Arroganz had arrived.
It held the enemy Armor firmly in one hand, a rifle in the other, and took aim at the other attackers. In the next moment, Arroganz pulled the trigger, and a bullet ripped through the stomach of another enemy suit, sending it crashing to the ground.
The Armor in Arroganz's grasp thrashed. "Let go of me, you—"
Arroganz emitted a shock wave from its left hand, and at once the enemy pilot fell silent. Arroganz promptly discarded the Armor and soared off to find its next opponent.
Clarice breathed a small sigh as she watched Leon leave. She stared at the battered suit that had tried to grab her moments before. A hole gaped in its stomach. Leon had pushed himself beyond mercy.
"So he's determined to see this through," she murmured.

***

Evacuees clamored for escape at the Roseblade estate in the capital. Above them, extravagantly Armored knights did battle and airships traded cannon fire. One vessel took a heavy hit and crashed into the buildings below. Fires raged across the city, with towers of smoke scattered all around.
"Lady Deirdre, please run!"
Deirdre turned to her guard and huffed. "You're telling *me* to run? My father and brother are fighting valiantly back home. If I left now, I would never be able to show my face to them again."
"But you're not a knight, my lady! No one would dare blame you if you escaped!"
She ignored his plea and resumed barking orders. "Deploy our airships! I don't care what kind they are, just get these evacuees to safety!"
"Will you be riding with us then?" asked her knight, hopeful.
"Yes, I will. *After* everyone else has evacuated."
"My lady, you're such a fool!" He burst into tears but nevertheless obediently relayed her instructions.
Just then an enemy pilot slipped right past Roseblade House's defenses and landed his Armor on the roof. He had been smashing noble residences and had turned his sights on the evacuees scattering like baby spiders.
Deirdre's temper flared as the Armor turned its weapon on the defenseless civilians. "Is that any way for a knight to behave?!"
"My lady, what are you doing?!" Her knight scrambled toward her, trying to drag her away.

“You have no right to say that to us!” the principality’s knight responded from inside his Armor. “But what does it matter? Your kingdom will sink anyway. Whether I kill you now or not, your deaths are inevitable!” He turned his gun toward Deirdre. “Beg for your life!”
The fear made Deirdre’s legs feel like cement, rooting her in place. Still, she lifted her chin. “A daughter of Roseblade House does not beg for her life. You would kill me regardless? Go on then, pull the trigger, you coward!”
“My lady, please don’t encourage them!”
Incensed by Deirdre’s ferocity, the enemy Armor moved to press the trigger.
Lancing down from above, a bullet pierced through the suit. The Armor collapsed.
Deirdre looked up. Among the security Armors hovering was a gray suit with a large container on its back, already flying away from her family’s estate.
“Oh? Not even going to greet me, hmm?” She sniffed. “How hateful.”
Beside Deirdre, her knight sagged in relief. “My lady, you don’t need to put on a brave front when your legs are trembling. Now come, let’s evacuate.”
“W-wait just a moment!” She hesitated before admitting, “My legs won’t move.”
Her knight sighed before offering a shoulder to help guide her inside the manor.

***

For the umpteenth time, I emptied the contents of my stomach into a paper bag inside Arroganz’s cockpit. The stench of bile filled the air, making me even more nauseated.
“Just surrender. Why are you guys doing this? It’s already clear you’ve lost.”
The principality’s forces still rampaged within the capital, despite the fact that I had destroyed their flagship. They were like a snake without its head, yet still they resisted.
“They most likely think surrender meaningless,” Luxion surmised.
Well, that was our fault. Some had tried to surrender, and the kingdom’s forces killed them anyway.
Smoke rose from all corners of the city. Numerous hostile airships had been shot down only to destroy the buildings below. The sea of fire swallowed up whole districts.
“Once we clean up the principality, we’ll have to provide aid. The nobles not following my orders can help out with that.”
“Yes, surely they’ll be willing to assist for the sake of their homeland.”
I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “Where’s our next battlefield?”
He hesitated. When he spoke, he sounded uncharacteristically apologetic.
“Master, I’m afraid this is it. I will only be able to provide the bare minimum of support from here on.”

“Got it. Do your best.”
“Are you truly sure about this?”
“Yep. Get going. You know I can’t leave this to anyone but you.”
He stared at me for a moment before he nodded. “The royal family’s ship is ready to go. I have prepared a separate AI to support the girls. If you need any help, use them.”
“An AI separate from you?”
“Yes. Also, please don’t push yourself beyond your limit. If the battle seems hopeless, re…tre…at…” Static swallowed his words before he could finish his sentence.
After a pause, his voice returned to normal, but it wasn’t the same Luxion. In fact, it was like an entirely different person. “The link with my main body has been severed.”
He spoke like a robot reciting a prerecorded line.
My stomach twisting in anxious knots, I readjusted my grip on the controls. “I’m putting my faith in you, partner.”

***

Luxion hovered in the sliver of space separating the kingdom’s floating mainland from the ocean below. The bulk of the continent cut off any sunlight, so the narrow space was bathed in darkness. A pillar of liquid carried ocean water up to the land above, but this was far from the most interesting sight down below. A number of tentacles jutted out of the sea, burrowing deep into the land above.
The Sea Giant was so vast that, despite the humanlike face peering out from the water, it looked more like an island. Luxion’s spaceship measured over seven hundred meters long, but compared to this creature, it was a flea.
Yet Luxion was calm even though he faced the beast alone. “Well, it shouldn’t be a problem to repeatedly annihilate this thing.”
His main cannon emitted a beam of light, severing the creature’s tentacles. They disappeared in a puff of black smoke.
The Giant’s eyes shifted, turning toward Luxion. More tentacles burst out of the water and wrapped tightly around his body.
“Don’t touch me.”
Luxion sliced through the tentacles with his lasers, then took aim with a missile launcher and fired. The bomb struck dead center, and the massive explosion blew the creature apart.
Smoke billowed around Luxion, momentarily swallowing his vision. Then:
“It’s gradually regenerating. Seems Master’s information was correct.”
Fresh tentacles shot out from the water, and Luxion blasted them off. The creature, with its human face and squid-like body, reared up, violent waves crashing all around it.

Luxion fired his main cannon again, wreathing himself in smoke once more. “Too bad for you. As long as I’m here, you won’t be able to complete your objective.”

The only problem was the remaining Giant—the one on the surface that Luxion couldn’t fight. He had no choice but to leave it to Leon and the *Partner*.

As the Sea Giant regenerated over and over again, Luxion continued his barrage, pinning it in place so it could do naught but heal itself.

“Master was right. I won’t lose, but I can’t win either. The problem really will be the other Giant… Master’s odds of survival are even lower than I anticipated.”

In between cannon blasts, Luxion focused his attention on adding improvements to Schwert inside the spaceships’ onboard factory. “You’ll be reborn anew, Schwert, in order to better serve our master.”

Chapter 9:
The Demon

THE PRINCIPALITY'S main force traveled alongside the Sky Guardian. Within their flagship, an elderly knight—Vandel, formerly the Black Knight—took a knee before Hertrauda. His right arm was covered in some kind of black organic goo.

She spoke to him coldly. "I believe I already told you I wouldn't grant your request yet."

Vandel didn't respond.

As the silence dragged, a key official standing beside Hertrauda stepped forward. "Lord Vandel, the kingdom will certainly come after our main force. We want you to fight alongside us."

Hertrauda narrowed her eyes.

The Demonic Suit's right hand… Ultimately, Vandel was the only one able to use it.

They had sacrificed over ten people trying to find someone who could effectively use the item. In the end, only Vandel had survived its parasitic bond. The skin on his arm had blackened like soot and was covered in small slits that occasionally peeled open to reveal gruesomely human eyes. Even now, they peered around the area, sometimes fixating on Hertrauda.

Vandel covered them with his opposite arm and apologized. "Pardon me. It seems I don't have complete control. But, Your Highness, I beg you to give me permission to rescue your sister."

"We already sent a rescue team. In the battle ahead, you may be able to have a rematch with the Fiendish Knight. Do you intend to run from that opportunity?"

If the kingdom meant to attack, the principality anticipated they would directly charge their main force. The kingdom had no hope of putting up a fight against the Sky Guardian. But the principality was also experiencing the same communication disruptions as their enemy. They had to remain on guard, as they had no idea if such an attack would truly come—or when. Leon's return to the battlefield was considered the worst-case scenario. If that happened, Vandel was their only hope of stopping him.

"But I swear, *I* can save her," said Vandel.

Hertrauda chuckled. "My sister does seem fond of you. And since we did send a rescue team ahead, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have you check on them—so long as you immediately report back."

The aristocrat beside her tried to protest, but Hertrauda dismissed him.

Vandel stood. "In that case, I will set out at once."

"We'll prepare you the fastest airship available."

"That's unnecessary. My body—I mean, my Armor will be enough on its own. An airship would only slow me down." He spun and left.

Beside her, the official dabbed at the sweat on his forehead. The old knight's ominous arm frightened him, but even more frightening were Vandel's bloodshot eyes. "So that arm of his is a Lost Item?" he said hesitantly. "A piece of a 'Demonic Suit.' It's turned him into a monster, if you ask me."
Hertrauda leaned back in her seat. "They say whoever uses it has to offer up their life in exchange for immense power. I never dreamed a day would come when we'd get to see one for ourselves."
"Do you think he can beat the Fiendish Knight?"
"Of course. But regardless, we still won't lose this war."
Trude, I pray that you're safe. Vandel is on his way to you.

***

The sky battle above the palace ended with the principality's remaining forces retreating. Kingdom airships gathered slowly, and my friends, who'd returned from their regions with the ships I'd sold them, assembled on the *Partner*'s deck.
Raymond glanced down at the palace in dismay. "It's in ruins."
"No way to avoid that when the enemy attacks from the sky."
"Can we actually win this? Look at how bad things are already. And that was only thirty ships."
Everyone felt anxious, so I tried to encourage them. "C'mon, you guys don't think I'd go into battle without a secret plan, right? I've got it all set up. Just you watch."
Just then, a white, shining airship rose from its underground hangar and drifted in front of us. This was the royal family's vessel, or as Luxion had dubbed it, the *Weiss*. He said the word meant *white*, which definitely fit. Come to think of it, it seemed long past time for Luxion to explain to me what Arroganz meant. *I bet whatever it means, it suits me perfectly!*
"That ship is your hidden weapon?"
"It's smaller than the *Partner*."
"Does it have some super powerful missiles crammed on board or something?"
I couldn't blame my friends for feeling underwhelmed; the *Partner* was obviously better equipped for battle. But the important thing about the *Weiss* was that Livia and Angie were on board. The *Weiss* required two people who'd affirmed their love for each other in order to exercise its true, amazing power.
Kinda makes me feel conflicted thinking about it that way, though. The way those two loved each other…where did that leave me?
"Hey, you're looking pale. Everything all right?" Daniel asked, concerned.
"I'm fine. Hey, you know, once we're done resupplying, I should explain what we're going to—"

I broke off as something small and dark soared through the sky, straight for the palace. It smashed through one of the walls, leaving a column of smoke behind.
Panicked, I turned to Luxion. “What’s going on?!”
“Checking now.”
His reaction was slower than usual. This thing wasn’t at all like the Luxion I was used to.
“Get Arroganz ready,” I said. “I’m going out.”
“We are still resupplying and performing maintenance on Arroganz. Please wait.”
And he wasn’t remotely flexible.
I turned back at the palace, heart racing, as an uproar rose from within.

***

Having breached the palace, Vandel broke right into its heavily secured vault and stepped out with two items: the Magic Flute and his beloved sword. His sword was constructed of adamantius and was too large and unwieldy for anything but an Armor to use. Yet even though it towered over him, Vandel now carried it one-handed, his lips pulled into a lopsided grin.
“I came to get you, my friend. Although my real objective is the princess.”
He rested the blade against his shoulder. As he turned to leave, several knights rushed in, blocking the door.
“Who are you?!”
“Lay down that weapon and surrender!”
“Who cares, shoot him!”
A kingdom Armor obstructed the hole Vandel had left in the wall, and the knights opened fire, thinking him trapped. But none of the bullets found their mark. It was as if some invisible barrier repelled their attacks…
Then the eyes on Vandel’s right arm flared open.
The knights reeled back. “M-monster! Fire! Fire!”
The kingdom Armor burst through the hole in the wall and reached for him, but Vandel easily sent his opponent reeling backward. He lifted his enormous sword, again with only one hand, and sheared through the Armor along with the knights. In the blink of an eye, it was over, and Vandel was staring down at their bisected corpses.
“Worthless whelps. Now to search for the princess.”
The eyes on his right arm shifted back and forth before focusing in a single direction.
“Ah, I see. That way.”
Vandel strode down the halls, cutting down any knights or soldiers he met along the way, until at last he made it to the room where Hertrude was kept. He burst through the door to find her waiting, safe and sound.
“Princess!”
All the eyes on his arm snapped shut.

“Vandel?! Why are you here? I just heard our preliminary assault failed.”
“They were pathetic,” Vandel said bitterly. “They couldn’t even save you, and they lost to those cowardly kingdom scum. Now, come, let’s take you home. Princess Hertrauda awaits you.”
“Really, Rauda?” Hertrude automatically accepted the Magic Flute he held out to her.
“Princess, stand back a bit.”
Hertrude stared in disbelief as Vandel’s right arm suddenly expanded. It swallowed him whole and reformed itself into a full suit of Armor. Its appearance resembled Arroganz, however, the ominous barbs studding it made it seem more organic than mechanic. It had wings like a bat and a barbed tail like a lizard. Rather than the hum of an engine, it pulsed with what sounded like a heartbeat.
“Vandel, don’t tell me you…used the Demonic Suit’s right hand?”
He had, in fact, used the same black Armor fragment she had shipped to the principality. Vandel could tell Hertrude understood the implications; tears trickled down her cheeks. Her sadness warmed his heart. *Please don’t cry for me, Princess.*
“Why would you use something like that?!” she sobbed.
Now one with the Armor, Vandel’s voice came out in a low rumble.
“Princess, this is the last act of service a feeble old man can provide. Now, please come along.”
“You didn’t have to. I could end it all right now with this flute.” She squeezed it in her hands, her eyes on her feet.
“You mustn’t!” Vandel protested. “Princess Hertrauda has already summoned the other two Guardians. You’re the only hope we have left.”
A last tear rolled down Hertrude’s cheek, but she nodded. She knew the consequences of summoning a Guardian. When Vandel offered his left hand, she climbed onto it, and the two set off.
A number of kingdom Armors lay in wait for them, but—
“Kingdom whelps! You’re no match for me. Bring out the Fiendish Knight!”
Vandel soared through the air, holding Hertrude protectively in his left hand and swinging his enormous sword with his right. He cut down one enemy after the other as they made their escape. The *Partner* hovered in the distance, but Vandel passed it by; he had Hertrude, and getting her back to the main army was top priority.
“Fiendish Knight, I’ve taken back the princess!” Vandel grinned, imagining Leon gritting his teeth in frustration somewhere in the distance. “I’ll be back to settle the score with you soon.” And he sped off.
The kingdom sent no one after him.

***

The principality had stolen Miss Hertrude and the Magic Flute. And that rampaging black Armor looked familiar, but I couldn’t recall where exactly

I'd seen it before. I crossed my arms and thought as hard as I could. It was driving me insane.
Nicks clapped me over the head. "Don't sleep!"
"Ouch! I wasn't!" I massaged my sore head as I took in the number of airships assembled around the *Partner*. My friends had come to my aid, thanks in part to the contracts they'd signed. Rows of ships dotted the sky above the capital, about two hundred in total. Many of them had rushed here from other territories at the behest of nearby regional lords.
My father fidgeted nervously. "Leon, you didn't tell me you were commanding the whole fleet. What led to all of this?" He'd rushed back as well, only to discover I'd been promoted to commander-in-chief. I couldn't blame him for being surprised.
"Eh, you know, one thing led to another and I just wound up being named supreme commander. These things just kinda happen." I shrugged.
"No! These kinds of things don't normally 'just kinda happen'!"
Nicks shook his head in resignation. "So, how are we going to win? I already saw the monster from a distance. It's ridiculously huge. Are we really going to be able to defeat it?"
I glanced over at the *Weiss*, the white vessel hovering in the middle of our fleet. "I don't make a habit of getting into fights I can't win. I've got a trump card."
Father gave me a skeptical look. "Lady Angelica and Livia? You're sending those two into battle? That's ridiculous. You can't. You love them, don't you?"
Stop. I already feel uneasy enough as it is. But I shook my head. "They're absolutely essential."
He wasn't entirely convinced, but he gave in. "You better protect them, then. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if they die."
That goes without saying.
Nicks glanced at me worriedly. I shot him a smile. "I know."
"Hold on just a minute," Marie interrupted. "Why am I riding on *this* ship?"
"That's obvious. The *Partner* will be at the front of the pack, charging the enemy. You'll be our barrier. I expect you to pull your weight."
To the temple's dismay, we'd snatched—uh, I mean *borrowed* the Saint's regalia items for Marie. She was going to make herself useful.
Nicks tilted his head. "Who is this girl? I feel like I've seen her somewhere before. Father, do you know her?"
"No clue. Who is she, Leon?"
"This girl?" I pointed my thumb at Marie. "She's the Saint. She's gonna be our shield."
They wrinkled their noses.
"As your father, I'm ashamed you would ever think to use a girl as a shield."
"Oh, shut it. I make use of whoever I can. Even if it's my own parents. I'll be working her to the bone, too."
"You're scum!" Marie glared at me.

I flicked her on the head before turning solemn. “You better work like your life’s on the line, because it is. If you hold up your end, I’ll do what I can to make sure they’re lenient with you.”
Marie cradled her head in her hands, tears beading in her eyes. “Clemency isn’t going to mean much if I die out here!”
“That’s not my problem! Suck it up and get your butt out there. Try to run and I’ll kill you. I don’t care if I have to chase you to the ends of this world to do it.”
She lowered her gaze in defeat.
Honestly, I really couldn’t think of any other way to get the temple to spare her. She was dead either way if we lost. Even if we won, she was still a criminal. At least if she fought like her life depended on it—which, again, it did—we could hope they would pardon her.
Just then, a squad of Armors landed on the deck, each painted a gaudy color. “Marie,” the red one called, “no need to be so anxious!”
I rolled my eyes. “Why are you guys here?”
The four pilots—Red, Blue, Purple, and Green—descended from their cockpits and gathered around Marie.
“I, Greg Fou Seberg, swear to protect you,” Greg said, voice swelling with confidence.
Tears streamed down Marie’s cheeks. “Y-you guys…”
“Don’t forget about me.” Chris removed his glasses and smiled at Marie.
“As long as we’re here, you have nothing to fear.” Brad swept a hand through his hair, striking his standard pose.
Finally, Jilk held a hand out to Marie. “Miss Marie, this time, we’ll be at your side. You aren’t going out there alone.”
“All of you, I…”
Before she could finish, another Armor touched down on the *Partner*’s deck—sparkling white with a blue cloak that billowed in the wind.
“I’ll be taking part in the battle as well!” the pilot declared from within the suit.
I squinted up at it. “Go home.”
The hatch to the cockpit opened, and a masked knight poked his head out. It was obviously Prince Julius. He was wrapped in a tight-fitting suit with a mask on his face and a cape fastened to his shoulders.
What in the world are you trying to pull? You look ridiculous. Stop. I’m getting secondhand embarrassment here!
“Who are you?” Jilk, Prince Julius’s foster brother and best friend, appeared to be genuinely caught off guard.
You’re kidding me. He’s just trying to be nice and act like he doesn’t know who it is, right?
Greg stepped in front of Marie, fully on guard. “Hey, Masked Dude, what are you here for?!”
I don’t believe it. I stared at them. They were all genuinely wary of Prince Julius.

Chris pulled out his sword. “Marie, step back.”
“What?” Marie stammered. “But that’s Juli—”
Brad conjured fireballs in either hand, ready to send them flying at a moment’s notice.
What’s wrong with you people?! That’s clearly Prince Julius!
Prince Julius hopped down from the cockpit, landing nimbly in front of his four friends. As he slowly stood to his full height, he said, “It seems you’re all curious about my true identity. For now, you may call me the Masked Knight.”
“Masked Knight?” Jilk whipped out his pistol and turned it on, let me reiterate, *Prince Julius*.
I groaned. I’m seriously about to cry over here.
“That’s right. I was moved by your passion and spirit! I will do what little I can to help—hey, wh-what are you doing? Viscount Bartfort, release me!”
“Shut up and get your butt over here, you big moron.” I threw my arm around his neck and yanked him away from the group so we could talk in the shadows, just the two of us. Once we were at a safe distance, I reached my hand out toward his mask, but Prince Julius slapped his hands over it.
“Why did you come here, Your Highness?”
“Y-you’re wrong! I’m not the great and noble prince! There *is* a reason I cannot reveal my identity to you, but I will be participating in this battle as a normal knight. And I am absolutely not Prince Julius.”
Does he really think he can fool me? “Enough. Go home.”
“Hold on just a—Viscount Bartfort! Don’t you need as much fighting power as you can get right now?!”
I scrubbed my face. “Look, I can’t use some random dude I don’t know. Now, off with you.”
“W-wait! I—I suppose I have no choice but to show you the truth.” He peeled off his mask, revealing—shocker—himself. “I actually am Julius.”
“Yeah, I know. I recognized you even with the mask on.”
“What?!” He gasped. “But my disguise was perfect.”
“You really do think I’m an idiot, don’t you?”
“Fine, I’ll tell you, but this is just between us. I want to participate in the battle.”
“Exit’s over there.” I pointed.
Prince Julius threw himself at me, clinging to my shoulders. “Please! Let me fight with everyone!”
“It’ll be my fault if you get yourself killed out there!”
“That’s why I’m wearing a mask!”
How would a stupid mask keep you alive?! “Go home!” I snapped.
“No!”
Argh! If I drove him off, odds were he’d still charge into battle and just get himself killed. This good-for-nothing prince was going to be the death of me.
So what should I do with him? As I cast about for a solution, the Weiss caught my eye. That’s it! I’ll just have all these troublesome jerks gather in

one place. If I put them on the Weiss, they can act as bodyguards for Livia and Angie. We've got our defenses concentrated there already, so they'll have a good chance of surviving this.
Although if I put it like that, I'd get pushback all over again.
"Are you really serious about this?" I asked.
"Absolutely."
"In that case, I'm going to put you in the most dangerous place possible."
"At the front? Hah! Wise choice, Bartfort."
The way he grinned from ear to ear made me want to punch him, but I suppressed the urge. "Don't be stupid. The key to this battle is the *Weiss*—the royal family's ship. We're going to use it to defeat that ridiculously huge monster. Thus, the enemy is most likely to target it."
Prince Julius's expression turned grim.
If I put Marie on board as well, I'm sure he'll fight to the death to defend the ship. "Marie will be there as well. It'll be dangerous. Do you have the guts to do this?"
He readjusted his mask, a smile spreading across his face. "Leave it to me, Supreme Commander!"
I am so, so glad you're so, so stupid.
Unfortunately, this meant sending Marie away from the front line, but I could stomach that if it meant her gang of dumbos would go with her.
"All right, then off to the *Weiss* with you."
"Yes. You won't regret this!" Prince Julius paused. "Uh, by the way…I kind of jumped from my cockpit without thinking. Is there any way for me to get back up there?" He glanced up at his Armor, puzzling over how to climb back in.
What an absolute blockhead.

***

Livia and Angie stood on the *Weiss*'s bridge, gaping at the entity before them.
"Um, Lux…?"
A round, white robot with a blue eye floated in front of them, a perfect replica of Luxion aside from its color scheme and its voice, which, while still robotic, was decidedly feminine.
"I'm afraid not. No, I will be your new 'familiar,' as you call it. I have been charged with controlling this ship."
Angie's eyes widened. "You can do that?"
"Oh, the vessel's a bit of an older model, but we've added some improvements, so yes. With me on board, you won't need a crew."
As such, the *Weiss* would be operated by a robot, much like the *Partner*. The only ones on board were therefore Livia, Angie, and their bodyguards.
Livia's hands ghosted over the robot's exterior. "And your name is?"

“Oh, now that’s a problem. Calling me by a serial number would be terribly dull. Why don’t you refer to me as Cleare?”
“May we address you as Cleare then?” asked Angie.
“Address me however you wish. I will do my utmost to protect you. Sourpuss though Luxion is, he certainly has taken a liking to you two.”
Angie stared down at her feet.
Cleare tilted forward slightly, puzzled. “Is something the matter, Angelica?”
“Is there any way we can meet with Leon? If we just set off right now, I won’t be able to tell him how I feel.”
“How you feel for the master, hmm? Very well. I’ll connect us.”
“Huh?”
A digital feed abruptly projected in midair, displaying Leon. He stood beside a strange masked man.
“Leon!” Livia gasped.
“Leon, um…I…” Angie struggled, uncharacteristically shy.
“Hmm? What’s this?” The masked man shoved Leon aside and leaned in until his face took up most of the feed.
“Excuse me, strange man, we would appreciate it if you moved,” Livia sniffed.
“What is with that outfit?” Angie wrinkled her nose. “A strange mask, and a pretentious cloak, a spandex suit on top of that? Are you some manner of pervert? Step aside and let us speak with Leon!”
The masked man’s shoulders slumped, but he disappeared from view. Leon returned, looking exasperated. He cleared his throat, eyes awkwardly darting back and forth between Livia and Angie. “Uh, ah…so what did you want?”
Livia clasped her hands to her chest. “We want to speak with you!”
“I have to do a briefing soon, but I can talk as long as you keep it short.”
Good. He was willing to listen. Angie took a deep breath and steadied herself. “It’s about what happened before. You see, I wanted you to know—”
“Hey, where did that masked knight go?” Greg cut in. “I need to see his face for myself or—hmm? What’s this thing?” His face took up the entire projection.
A vein bulged on Angie’s forehead, but Jilk, Brad, and Chris soon joined Greg. They all waved at Angie and Livia.
“This is amazing. You can see the other person’s face *and* hear their voice.”
“We’ll be heading your way soon, so just wait a bit longer.”
“Marie will be coming along as well, so make preparations for her arrival.”
Face red with indignation—they’d interrupted to make demands for Marie?! —Angie slammed her fist through the projection. “Get out of the way, all of you! We’re talking to Leon!”
Static ran through the image, and then it flickered and faded.
“Ah?!” Livia glanced at Cleare, alarmed, but the robot merely moved its eye from side to side as if shaking its head.

“Unfortunately, the communication network continues to be disrupted, so our connection was severed.”
“W-was it my fault?” Angie asked.
“No, it’s been like this for a while,” said Cleare.
Livia hung her head, disappointed. Angie reached over and squeezed her hand. “It’s okay. We’ll definitely tell him how we feel.”
“You’re right.”
“Oh my, how passionate you girls are,” Cleare said, tone turning playful. “I can see why they say this is true love. Now, come…it’s about time for us to depart.”
Livia faced forward. “That’s quite the sight.”
Over two hundred airships began pushing forward, ready to challenge the principality in a decisive battle.
“Unfortunately, it is largely a jumbled mass of ships unable to coordinate due to the communication interference. We may have the numbers, but it will be a miracle if we win under these circumstances,” said Angie.
“A miracle? Knowing Leon, he’ll pull it off.”
“True. I can’t help but expect the impossible from him.”
“It appears the battle will take place over a large lake,” said Cleare. “The water comes up directly from the ocean in a pillar connected to the underbelly of the continent.”
Livia pressed a hand to her chest. “We’ll be battling above a lake?”
Angie nodded. “Most aerial battles take place over bodies of water. That way if anyone goes down, there’s a possibility of survival.”
Livia still shook her head. “That will pollute it terribly.” All of the waste from the battle would fall into the lake, and the contamination would cause no end of trouble for anyone who depended on that water to live.
“This is a battle of life or death. Unfortunately, we don’t have the luxury to worry about such things.” Angie squeezed her hand. “But I promise, once this is all over, we can help with restoration efforts.”

***

A small vessel launched from the *Partner*, at the head of the fleet, and made its way toward the *Weiss*. It carried Marie and four of her lovers, as well as the Masked Knight.
I was now alone on the deck. Thick clouds gathered in the distance. We were less than a day away from clashing with the principality’s forces.
“We have an ace up our sleeve,” I told Luxion’s shell of a body. “Although I didn’t really want to bring those two onto the battlefield.”
I had a number of regrets, wondering what I could have done differently. Maybe if I had used Luxion to gather information sooner, I could have kept the story line from becoming this distorted. Maybe I would have realized sooner that the principality had another princess and another Magic Flute. Then I might not have needed to become the commander-in-chief. Maybe

none of this would have happened. As it was, we were so out of sync with the story that our only option was to meet the principality in a full-on battle. I didn't know if I'd even really helped where I was.
"Ah… Wait a minute."
That mask Prince Julius wore—I remembered it now. From the game. But I was positive it had been worn by a different character. They'd been quite striking, though I never had figured out their true identity. It certainly hadn't been the prince. They'd been really theatrical, but despite that, quite strong. An interesting tidbit, I supposed…but it didn't seem particularly relevant at present.
"Still, I didn't expect the prince to join the battle wearing a *mask*."

***

Back at the palace, the king rummaged through his secret room.
"I-It's not here! My disguise is gone! And the key to my custom-made Armor has disappeared as well. Who could have done this? Mylene? Oh, I bet it was that witch!"
As Roland raged, Mylene came padding into the room behind him. "Have you seen Julius?" she asked.
Roland swung around, panicking to see her in his hidden room. "Julius?! H-he's not here! W-wait, why aren't you surprised?"
Mylene glanced about his secret room with an expression of supreme disinterest. "Oh, this? I've known for a while. Not that I've bothered to learn what you keep in here. More importantly, I'm looking for *your son*."
"You knew about this?" Roland demanded. "I—I had no idea you… Ah, at any rate, I don't know where the boy is. Probably sulking in his room."
Mylene shook her head. "He's not, that's why I came to ask you. The two of you are so very similar. I worry he's going to get himself into another mess."
Something horrible suddenly occurred to Roland. "Does…does *Julius* know about my secret room?"
"Of course. He told me about it when he was little."
Roland flew out the door.
Mylene chased after him. "What's wrong?!"
"Julius! That idiot stole my disguise and my Armor!"
Her face paled. "Why do you even have something like that?!"
"Because it's heroic! Obviously!"

Chapter 10:
Livia's Power

THE TWO PRINCESSES were reunited at last in Hertrauda's private quarters aboard the principality flagship.

"Please don't summon the Land Guardian," Hertrauda begged her older sister. "The Sky and Sea Guardians will be more than enough to achieve our objective, Trude."

"I've put quite the burden on your shoulders," Hertrude said regretfully. "If only I had used my Magic Flute sooner—"

Hertrauda shook her head. "One of us had to. We already decided that if you failed, I would take up the banner and head for the kingdom."

Hertrude clenched the flute in her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks. The flute's true power came at a cost: the player's life force. This sacrifice gave the player the ability to summon an enormous creature known as a Guardian.

"Rauda, I don't know anymore," Hertrude murmured. "Which country was really in the wrong?"

"Even if what Queen Mylene said was correct, we can't stop this anymore," Hertrauda said. It was not an answer to Hertrude's question—but it was the truth. "We *will* sink the kingdom's mainland and take their Suspension Stone. And with that, principality will have new land to claim for its own. Our nation needs it in order to become a world power, to control our fate."

That Suspension Stone was their true aim, more so than revenge. With it, they could expand their territory by repurposing the stone for vessels, or artificial islands, or other vital technologies. But the principality could never hope to overcome the kingdom's forces in a fair fight; desperate measures were their only route to victory.

"I only wonder if our actions are truly just," Hertrude whispered.

"I can't say," Hertrauda replied simply. "All I can do is entrust the rest to you, once this is all over."

Their parents had passed away in an accident while they were young. And while the royal family included a few other surviving relatives, only these two sisters were privy to state secrets. Both had received the education necessary to one day inherit the throne. One of them had to survive—to lead their country to the future the other created.

In any case, their time together was limited. Hertrude was determined to indulge her sister in any way she could.

"Trude, what did you do while you were in the kingdom?" Hertrauda asked.

"I was a transfer student at their academy. It was far more wicked than I imagined." She had heard the female students owned slaves and looked down on the male students. Even so, it had been a shock to see for herself. "That Fiendish Knight bowed his head to every girl on campus."

“You mean the one who beat Vandel?” Hertrauda frowned. “How did the kingdom change so *much*? Before the principality declared its independence, their society was the same as ours, from what we read.”
“Good question. It was a very strange country. The Fiendish Knight even called up his own airship because a girl wanted to go on an adventure of all things. Oh, speaking of, I got to see the elves’ homeland and one of the ruins of the ancient people.”
Hertrauda’s eyes lit up with wonder as Hertrude described her travels. The principality’s royal family had descended from adventurers just as the royal family of Holfort Kingdom had, so the two girls had grown up on tales of their derring-do.
“You really did go on an adventure…” Hertrauda grinned from ear to ear. “I’m so jealous. I just don’t have the time.”
“Rauda, I’m so sorry. I’m really, truly sorry.”
But their time together was up. A knight had arrived with a report.
“Princess Hertrauda! We’ve confirmed the kingdom’s forces are closing in!”
Hertrauda’s expression changed from that of childish wonder to that of a cold, hard leader. “I’m on my way. Trude, if I collapse, the rest is up to you.”
Only a short distance remained between them and the kingdom’s forces—then the capital, and the Suspension Stone. Once they arrived, it would all be over.
Hertrude smiled at her sister, tears rolling down her cheeks. “When the times comes, I’ll do what needs to be done, but until then, I will stay by your side.”
Hertrauda smiled as well. “You will be my pillar, Trude.”

***

I sat Arroganz down on the *Partner*'s deck. Inside the cockpit, I whistled to myself, trying to downplay my anxiety. "This sight's got a lot more impact in person than it did in the game."

The principality's forces flew beneath the giant monster in the sky, as if using it for protection, sticking close as they steadily made their way toward the capital.

"The target has entered blast range," said Luxion's shell. No snarky quips, just the bare minimum of acknowledgment.

Through the clouds, I saw the enormous creature was covered in dozens of eyes and had multiple arms. Several of its gargantuan pupils were trained directly on the kingdom's forces.

Our fleet—the *Partner* and all our ships—charged theirs.

As we flew, the Giant reached one of its massive hands toward us.

"Target approaching."

"Hit it hard!" I roared.

"Order received," Luxion said. "Firing missiles now."

As the Giant's hand threatened to close around us, the *Partner* released three rounds, triggering an enormous blast as the bombs hit their mark. The creature's limb disintegrated in a puff of smoke.

"Guess we should keep firing!"

"Commencing bombardment."

The *Partner*'s largest cannon fired, swallowing the Giant in a blinding explosion. Several missiles followed, one after another, blowing off its arms. Principality ships panicked, scattering and repositioning now that we'd blown off their beloved final boss's creepy arms.

"The enemy fleet has changed formation," Luxion reported.

"Little slow on the uptake there!"

They were preparing to return fire. But their positioning was inefficient and uncoordinated; their communication networks were as disrupted as ours. However, thanks to Luxion's improvements, the ships my friends and family commanded outstripped the enemy's, technologically speaking.

I stood Arroganz up, readied my rifle, and began shooting down the monsters swarming around the enemy's fleet. There were thousands, maybe even tens of thousands. And while the *Partner* was busy attacking the Giant, dealing with the monsters—and airships, and Armors, and everything else—fell to the rest of us.

The kingdom's fleet fired as they closed in, cannons pelting the monsters, which burst into clouds of black smoke. Meanwhile, the principality's forces turned their broadside toward us and unloaded their own cannons at the *Partner*. None of their rounds left a mark, even when they did find their target. Most were deflected by the ship's barrier.

"Blow them to pieces!"

The *Partner* careened forward until it was nose-to-nose with the enemy forces; the allied ships behind it opened fire with front-mounted cannons. The principality's fleet also had a barrier, but our rounds pierced right through and sank vessel after vessel.
"How do you like our cutting-edge cannons? Don't think you can protect yourself with a measly magical shield!"
After their first warship sank, the principality began deploying Armors. Another vessel moved to block the *Partner*'s path, again unloading a row of side-facing cannons. The *Partner* deflected them all.
"Weak. If that's all you got, you can't stop us."
The *Partner* rammed right into the side of the enemy vessel, bending it in the middle. As our ship plowed on, the principality's ship tore in half and plummeted into the lake below.
"Once we get in close, this battle is ours."
We had penetrated their formation and were now immediately below the Giant. It couldn't attack us so long as we were mixed in with the principality's forces. The kingdom's ships followed close behind the *Partner* to enter the fray, then deployed their own Armors. The battle took on an intense, chaotic pitch.
"We've cleared the first step."
The *Partner* launched several missiles straight at the Giant, exploding its limbs into puffs of black smoke. The clouds surrounding the monster absorbed the lingering fumes, then they swelled and darkened.
The battle had begun at dawn with clear skies, but now thick, black clouds loomed over us. It was from these storm clouds that the regenerated monster reappeared, its dozens of eyes all trained on the *Partner*.
"It revived even faster than I expected, but let's keep up the attack and pin it down."
"Enemy approaching," said Luxion.
Principality Armors were headed straight toward Arroganz.
"We found you, Fiendish Knight!"
"Fiendish? Ironic coming from a bunch of fiends like you!" You're coming here to kill me, and I'm about to kill all of you. We're like two peas in a pod.
I took aim with my rifle and pulled the trigger, blasting right through an enemy Armor's stomach. They collapsed in front of me on the deck of the *Partner*. Looking up, I saw that the enemy ships and Armors had the *Partner* surrounded. I turned my gun on a ship straight above me and fired at its engine, which burst into flames. It crashed down harmlessly onto the *Partner*'s defensive shield.
Staticky voices filtered into my cockpit.
"Use your Armors to destroy it!"
"Shoot him down and they'll make us generals!"
"His head is mine!"

I grabbed my axe with my left hand and hacked away at the first Armor to approach, gouging out his stomach with a diagonal cut. The pilot within would be beyond saving.
“Your reaction time has slowed,” said Luxion.
“Yep, thanks for noticing!”
Another enemy charged, and I brought my axe down on his head. The blade sank so far into his torso that I couldn’t yank it out and had to abandon the weapon. I shot down a third enemy with my rifle before pulling out a new weapon to replace my axe.
I let myself take one brief glance at the *Weiss.* “I’m counting on you.”
Then I turned my gaze forward and lifted off from the *Partner*’s deck.

***

Angie and Livia watched from the *Weiss*’s bridge as the kingdom’s forces charged into the enemy’s ranks and began an all-out attack. Livia trembled, depending on Angie to keep her upright.
“Livia, let’s rest for a bit.”
Livia shook her head, tears falling. She had both hands on her head, and her breaths came in strangled gasps. “It’s so painful. Why is everyone fighting? It hurts so much… Why?”
Angie hesitated. “I wonder the same.”
She knew the logical answer; her teachers had taught her countless reasons for war. But seeing the battlefield for herself made her second-guess them all.
Livia clutched her chest.
“Hey!” Marie bellowed, dressed in her Saint’s regalia. “We’ve got enemies swarming us, you know?”
“Be quiet!” Angie snapped.
“Y-yes, ma’am!”
“The escort ships are protecting. We won’t fall easily.”
Cleare, floating beside them, moved her eyeball in a nod. “The biggest threat is far above—the Giant, as your people call it. Other than that, nothing on this battlefield can sink this ship. Now, are the two of you ready? Marie, what about you?”
It clearly irked Marie to be treated as an extra, but she was too intimidated by Angie to complain.
Angie held Livia upright, whispering softly, “Livia, let’s finish this quickly. Are you up for it?”
Although she continued to sob, Livia nodded and clasped her hands as if in prayer.
Angie mimicked the pose—and some strange sensation overcame her. What’s going on? My chest aches. This overwhelming sadness… I can’t stop the tears.
Voices of those on the battlefield trickled into her head:

<Help! I don't want to die!>
<Mom, save me!>
<This is why I didn't want to get involved in this stupid war!>
Every cry was a life, and every single one faded after it called out—they made Angie's heart twist in anguish. *This is what you've been feeling, Livia?*
"Hm, this function wasn't listed in the manual—the ship seems to react to Olivia's power," said Cleare. "Perhaps it would be apt to call this phenomenon Resonance?"
Suddenly, Marie shrieked, "Aaaah! A monster is coming right at us!" She pointed straight ahead.
One of the principality's creatures lunged toward them, its jaw cracked open.
"Away with you," said Cleare, and the *Weiss*'s main cannon blasted right through the beast. The AI turned to Marie. "I'd appreciate it if you would do some work as well."
"Huh? What am I supposed to do?"
"Mimic the other two girls and make use of your Saint's power."
Clearly flustered, Marie copied Angie and Livia's posture and began praying. At last, the *Weiss* shuddered, finally drawing out its true potential.
Angie glanced up at the ceiling and spread her arms wide. *A warm sensation is washing over me. It's so calming.*
As she did, an image appeared in her mind: summer break, when she, Livia, and Leon, tight-knit and together, had come home after bathing in the hot spring. The evening sky had been so beautiful. She'd enjoyed herself so much—so truly.
If only those days could have continued forever.

***

I cut down an encroaching monster and dared to glance behind me. All the Armors, all the ships—everything had frozen in place. The battle came to a sudden stop, and suddenly, every monster in the area evaporated in a burst of black smoke. Warm light enveloped us, emanating from the *Weiss*.
"Well, there it is. The final weapon."
Even the Giant looming above us snapped its eyes shut and shielded itself with its arms, for what good it did. The *Weiss*'s light was so powerful it gradually corroded the Giant's body.
"And now it ends."
One by one, the principality's Armors lowered their arms. The static on our communication networks cleared, and the thick clouds shrank back, giving way to a bright blue sky.
"Love really is amazing! Hmm?!" I tried to cackle over our victory, but all my will to fight was sapped from my body as fear settled in my gut. It was as if something had ripped the aggression out of me.
A voice echoed all through the sky.

“Don’t fight anymore. I don’t want to see you all hurt. Please, stop this!”
It was Livia.
“So that’s it. This is Livia’s real power.”
Her voice pierced straight to the heart, but not in a way that unsettled. As she spoke, her words touched people’s souls and swayed their emotions. No one could resist her.
“Let’s stop, okay? If we keep this up, many lives will be lost. Please quit fighting.”
If mere words could stop a war, people would never have suffered it. Yet *her* desire for the battle to end seeped right into me.
Beside me, Luxion’s empty shell spoke. “Psychic attack detected.”
Yes, that was exactly what this was—and a powerful one at that.
The *Weiss* amplified and strengthened Livia’s natural ability, and it was altogether brutal. The principality’s knights, who had so resented the kingdom, dropped their weapons as they listened to her. Some of them might have wanted to retort, *Screw that!* or *We can’t let it end like this!* But whatever lingering hatred they had evaporated in the face of Livia’s sorrow.
The sight brought back memories from one of the scenes in the game.
Above us, the Giant gave one final, eerie cry before it vanished completely.
“What a fearsome attack,” I mumbled. A power like this shouldn’t be used lightly…if ever.

***

Hertrauda watched from the principality’s flagship, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Why does your heart ache this much for us? Stop it. You’re supposed to be our enemy! Don’t be sad for us! Please, I’m begging you! Enough!”
But Livia’s anguish filtered through, and Hertrauda’s heart ached right along with hers. Those standing nearby stared blankly ahead or cried as they slid to the floor. Livia’s power robbed them of their will to fight.
“Are we really supposed to forget our grudge? Just like that?”
It was vexing, but at the same time, Hertrauda’s desire for revenge ebbed away. Hertrude had asked if the principality’s cause was just—Hertrauda had said it didn’t matter. But did it?
Hertrude wrapped her little sister in her arms. “Rauda, let’s put an end to this. The Sky Guardian has already disappeared.”
Hertrauda shook her head. “No. I don’t want this. If it ends, why did I have to sacrifice my life? I—I have to fight! Otherwise, what am I dying for?!”
Frustrated, Hertrauda squeezed her Magic Flute. She wanted to fight, but her heart disobeyed her. She was supposed to hate these people, but she couldn’t.
“Cowards! The kingdom really is rotten for pulling something like this. How low can you sink—not even letting your enemy hate or resent you for what

you've done? How dare they rob me of my will! It's not fair, controlling our hearts like this."
Hertrauda burst into tears, and Hertrude hugged her tight, crying as well.
"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for making you do this in my place."
As the Sea Guardian disappeared, the Magic Flute in Hertrauda's hands disintegrated, too.
"It can't be… Even the Sea Guardian lost…" Gradually, the life drained out of Hertrauda… Her consciousness drifting further and further away.
"Rauda!"
"Trude, I'm scared, but…it's kind of warm."
Livia's power gradually overrode even Hertrauda's fear. In its place, a comforting glow enveloped her. Her resistance vanished, and her expression turned calm and peaceful.
"I'm sorry, Trude. I'm so sorry…for leaving you all alone like this."
Hertrauda's eyes slowly closed, and her older sister's sobbing grew fainter and fainter until there was nothing left but silence.

***

Vandel stood nearby as Hertrude sobbed, until her lips slowly broke into a smile.
"Princess…"
"Vandel, I—I think something's wrong with me. I should be devastated, but I feel so warm and…happy. Rauda's gone, but they won't even let me mourn her. What a barbaric kingdom…"
Vandel softly placed a hand on her shoulder. "Leave it to me. I will settle this."
"Vandel?"
Vandel alone was unaffected by Livia's psychic attack. He had the influence of the Demonic Suit to thank for that. "Now, before you lose all will to continue, command me," he said.
Hertrude pulled a face, conflicted. She'd made the same expression when she was younger, and it brought back so many fond memories for Vandel.
"Princess!" he urged.
Her hesitation broke. "Vandel, go. Show them that the principality won't back down."
He nodded sharply and marched off. When he stepped outside the bridge, he covered his mouth and hacked into his hand. His palm came away coated red with blood.
"My body's done well to hold up this long." Grateful for that, Vandel turned his gaze to his right arm. "I at least have to sink the ship causing all of this."
The white vessel, the center of the fleet, hovered in the distance.
That's the one. I have to get rid of it. He flexed his right arm. It enlarged, swallowing the rest of his body as it transformed into an Armor.
"Now, let's get started."

Vandel leapt up through the air, making his way directly toward the *Weiss*.

***

I was in a daze. It was like being overcome with drowsiness even though I knew it was no time to be sleeping. Maybe that wasn't the best example, but regardless, this whole battle seemed utterly pointless now.
"Master, the attack has contaminated your mind."
I heard what Luxion was saying, but right now I felt annoyed with everything I'd done. What had I even fought for this whole time? Marie was the one in the wrong. No one could have gotten mad at me for abandoning her. Not a single person—well, okay, my parents from my previous world, but I'd never see them again. Even so, they'd probably have said something like, *You're her big brother, you need to look after her*.
Yeah, well, that wasn't in my character.
"Enemy approaching. It's headed straight for the *Weiss*," Luxion reported.
I whipped around. A black, fake-looking Arroganz with thorny plating charged straight for the white ship.
I've seen that Armor somewhere before, I'm pretty sure… But I couldn't remember where. "Hmm? The Weiss?"
No sooner did I say that than the black Armor punctured a hole through the vessel. An explosion rocked the skies.
"Shit!"
Panicked, I seized Arroganz's controls and launched toward the *Weiss*, my head abruptly clearer than it had been a few moments ago. "Weird, I almost feel like I was dreaming."
"It was a psychic attack," said Luxion. "The *Weiss* projected it at everyone indiscriminate of allegiance."
"So that's Livia's power, huh? Terrifying."
When that warmth had wrapped around me, it filled me with both joy and fear. The other vessels and Armors still hung motionless.
"Whatever, so that enemy unit is—"
"The same one that stole Hertrude and the Magic Flute from the palace," Luxion finished.
"It's that Black Knight geezer?!"
Dread flooded through me, and I accelerated.

***

On the underside of the continent, the Sea Giant disappeared. And as far as Luxion was concerned, the power that had vanquished it was a dangerous one.
"So this is Olivia's ability? I see why Master called it the ultimate weapon."
Smoke billowed from Luxion's ship.

“The communication networks are slowly stabilizing. Just a little bit more and I should be able to reestablish the connection with my portable terminal.”
He submerged his ship, letting the seawater bring down its temperature. Steam rose off it in waves, enveloping Luxion in a white mist.
“Hopefully nothing serious has happened in my absence.” As his ship cooled, Luxion contemplated what to do next. *As long as Master’s still alive, it will be fine.*

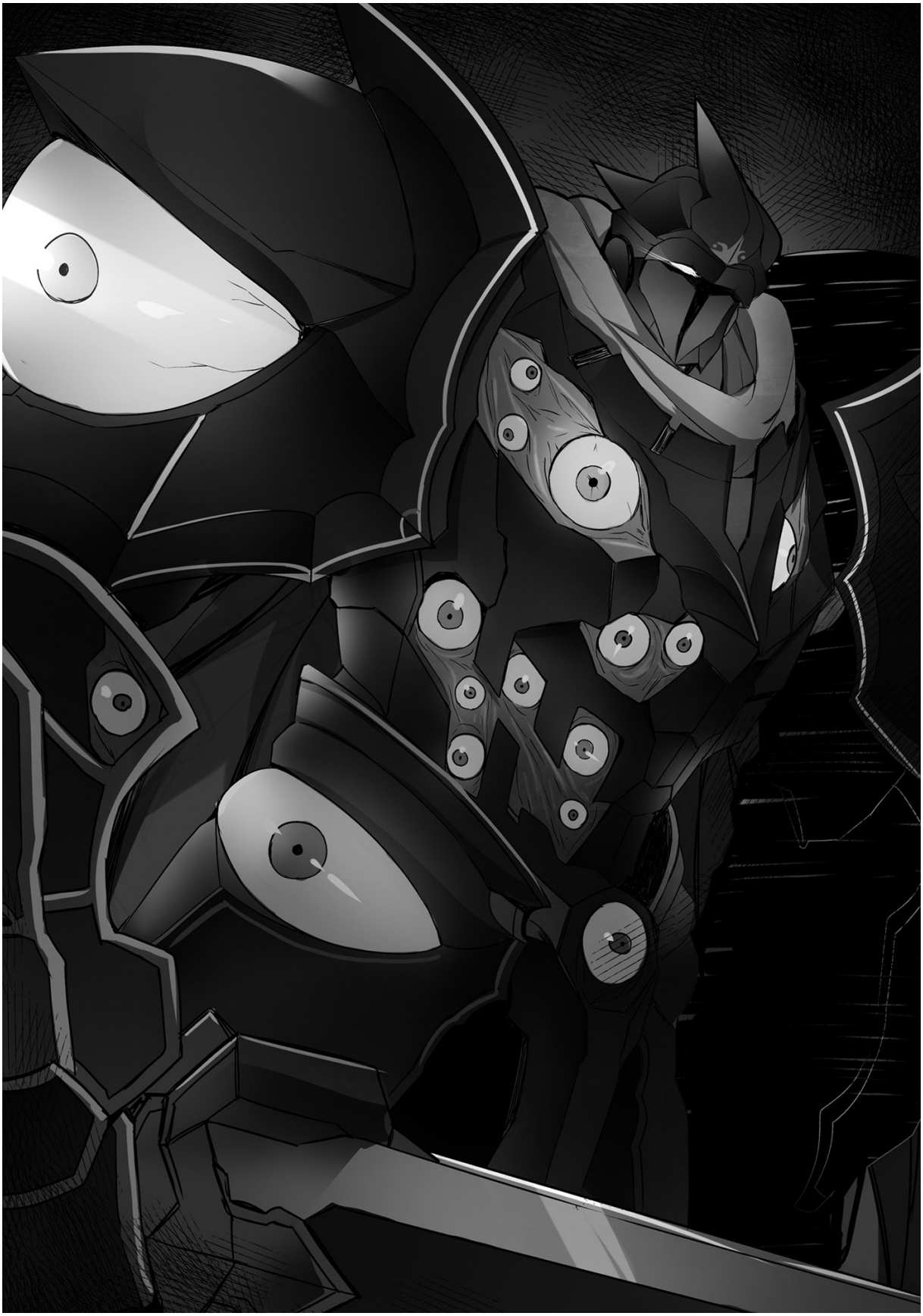
***

Vandel sliced his enormous sword through the beautiful white vessel’s outer hull and pushed his way in through the hole. “What’s this?”
Legless robots came charging at him with weapons drawn. He slammed the broadside of his sword against them and sent them flying. One of them he caught by the arm for closer inspection.
“There’s no one inside? What bizarre creations.”
He crushed the robot in his hand, then proceeded to hack away at the ship as he moved forward. “A vessel like this shouldn’t exist. The kingdom is evil, just as I suspected. Evil—yes, evil that should be destroyed!”
His right arm swelled, and magic shot out from its many eyes. The magic blasted through the interior of the ship, fires breaking out in its wake. The vessel began to lose altitude.
“That’s right. The kingdom must be destroyed. They are the enemy!”
Vandel continued his destructive path all the way to the bridge. There, he found three people—mere children. “Girls? Now I understand. So you did this.”
He stood in front of the three frightened young women and raised his sword, but the short-haired one stepped out in front of the others.
“Please wait! Let’s stop fighting. We can’t keep going like this!”
“No!” Vandel choked up blood as he resisted her. “It’s not over yet. I won’t let it be over! As long as our countries exist, we will continue to battle. It is only natural after what you did to us!”
The second girl, her face fierce, snapped at him. “Ridiculous! Are you going to act as if the principality is innocent?”
Even so, Vandel didn’t back down. “Innocence? What of it? Do you know what it feels like to see your family killed before you?! I had a wife and daughter, and I tried to protect them. My little girl was but an infant, and your kingdom murdered her!”
No more words. Vandel brought his sword crashing down on the girls, but a sudden attack hit him from behind. A wire, wrapped around his waist, ripped him off the ship’s bridge. He spun to face the culprit and found five different colored Armors.
“*We’re* your opponents!” A white suit with a cape billowing behind it charged toward him, sword in hand.

Vandel tore off the wire and parried the attack, cackling from within his Armor. “Don’t think you can stop me if that’s all you’re capable of!” He knocked the white suit away.
The green suit fired at him with a rifle. Vandel didn’t even bother dodging; his outer plating deflected every round. The enemy’s panic was palpable.
“Well then, let’s see if you can repel this!”
A phalanx of spears surrounded him all at once and then simultaneously plunged toward him, piercing the joints of his armored plating.
“How’s that?! You can’t escape—”
“Hmph!” Vandel flexed his muscles, and every last spear snapped in half.
“You bastard!”
“It’s not over yet!”
Together, a red and a blue Armor moved on him in a pincer attack, but Vandel deflected one with his sword and flicked the other away with his tail.
“What’s wrong, brats? Did you really think such feeble attacks would best old Vandel?” he taunted.
The white Armor flinched. “Vandel? You’re the Black Knight?”
“That’s right. Well, formerly. Regardless, I can rid myself of you lot in mere seconds.”
He lunged, lifting his greatsword through the air with every intention of slicing the white Armor in two.
But the red Armor slammed into him from the side, and the blue suit swept in from the front.
“The way you fight—are you the Sword Saint?” Vandel asked. “No, you’re too inept.”
“Graaaah!” The blue suit swung at him fiercely, but Vandel blocked with his blade.
As the others circled around him, he laughed. “That’s right. Show me what you’re really made of! The Black Knight requires stronger opponents!” His eyes were bloodshot, his mental state increasingly unstable.
His rampage put the five Armors at an even more severe disadvantage. Vandel’s Armor swelled, more eyes popping out across his skin. His opponents shrank back from his ominous visage.
“Scared, cowards? Then die!” Vandel cackled as he brought his sword swinging down—but just then, another Armor swept in front of them and sent him reeling back. “What?!”
But he was elated when he saw who had interrupted.
At last we meet. A savage grin spread across Vandel’s face. “I’ve been waiting for you, Fiendish Knight!”
Arroganz loomed before him.
“Yeah, that’s a real freaky name you’ve got for me,” Leon replied. “But if I’m a fiend, that makes you something even worse.”
Overjoyed, Vandel hardly noticed the trickle of blood running from one corner of his mouth.

***

What the hell was going on here? The sinister Armor felt more like a living thing than a machine, and those eyes all over it, darting back and forth, gave me the goosebumps.
“I’ve waited all this time to fight you again,” said Vandel.
“Thanks for the heartfelt confession, but it’s not as flattering as you think. I would’ve been cool with never seeing you again. That is one creeptastic Armor you’re piloting.”



He cackled. “I owe you and the kingdom my gratitude. This item—the Demonic Suit’s right hand—lay dormant in your vault. But none of you recognized its value, so the princess had it sent to the principality instead!”
“What?” My brows knit.
“Now our Armors can fight at the same level. Let’s have a fair battle this time, based purely on skill!” Vandel charged toward me.
I dodged, but he swung in behind me.
“Enemy approaching from the rear,” Luxion intoned.
“Yeah, I *know*!”
I managed to block the attack again, this time with my rifle, but his greatsword cleaved right through it. I abandoned the weapon and fished out a new one. Vandel’s suit moved so fluidly, and so fast. It was clearly superior to the last one he’d battled me in.
I didn’t stand a chance.
“You’re annoyingly persistent, Gramps!”
“I’m not dying until I’ve taken your head!”
Arroganz soared up high with the Black Knight in hot pursuit.
“Take this!” Vandel roared, and the eyes on his suit conjured fireballs. I tried to dodge, but they followed close behind me.
“This is cheating!” I cried, accelerating in an attempt to outrun them. But he kept creating even more. “Send out the drones!”
“Deploying drones,” said Luxion.
Dozens of robots shot out of the container on my back. They were small, round, and equipped with machine guns, which they unloaded on the fireballs. The drones managed to disperse some of the flaming projectiles, but many of them were destroyed in the process. Any that survived the firestorm, the Black Knight cut in two with his greatsword.
“You scumbag!” I snapped.
“You’re the one person I don’t want to hear that from…” Vandel paused. “No, you’re not the one I need to take down.” He abruptly ceased his pursuit, and his gaze wandered to the ship directly below us—the *Weiss*.
“Don’t you dare!”
“Duty compels me to sink that ship.” The eyes on Vandel’s suit powered up to release another barrage of fireballs.
I dropped altitude with all haste and swung in front of the *Weiss*’s damaged bridge. I caught a glimpse of Livia and Angie behind me. Marie stood there as well. Damn—even if they wanted to escape, the exits had collapsed and sealed them in.
“Throw up our defenses,” I ordered.
“Activating shield,” said Luxion.
I protected the three girls with my Armor as Vandel pelted me with one fireball after another. Unfortunately, I couldn’t block them all. A few struck the *Weiss* dead center, triggering even greater explosions.

The idiot brigade fanned out behind me to help protect the girls. As Vandel continued his assault, flames tore through the *Weiss*, and the ship started to truly sink.
“Tch, and after all that trouble we went through trying to stop this.” I gritted my teeth as I continued blocking as much of Vandel’s magic as I could.
“I refuse to let it end like this,” Vandel said. “This war isn’t over until one side loses! Not before then!”
I turned to the masked knight. “Hey, you, pervert knight!”
“I told you already, call me the ‘Masked Knight’!”
“Yeah, whatever. Evacuate the girls! I’ll take care of the situation here.”
Prince Julius hesitated as if he wanted to protest, but after a short pause he said, “Fine.” He and his friends had realized they were no match for the Black Knight.
Good.
“I’ll deal with Gramps.” Once more, I lunged forward as the Black Knight lifted his sword.
Just then, an enormous mountain rose straight up out of the lake.
“You’ve got to be freakin’ kidding me!”
But wait. It was no mountain—it was another one of those damn Giants!
“New enemy sighted,” said Luxion. “It is a new type of Giant.”
For a split second, I let my guard down as a cold sweat poured down my back. The Black Knight’s sword came crashing down on me, and the blow sent me hurtling to the ground.

***

Hertrude held her Magic Flute in hand as she stared down at her precious little sister, lying there on the floor. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t a better sister to you. Why did things have to end this way?”
Tears trickled down her cheeks as one of the principality’s chief nobles approached. The man was injured, blood running down from his forehead.
“You brats,” the noble spat. “How pathetic can you be, failing this miserably?!” He cursed them both and lifted his foot to kick Rauda’s body.
Hertrude intercepted him, taking the blow instead and dropping her Magic Flute in the process. “Stop! Rauda did her best!”
“And what good did that do? Results are all that matter! You’re just as useless as your parents were. Both of them were opposed to the war. That’s why we killed them and tried to start over with the two of you!” His face colored with despair. “This is the end. It’s all over for us. At this rate, they’ll have to counterattack and invade the principality to keep up appearances. I thought we could win if we used those monsters. I never dreamed the enemy would render us powerless!”
Hertrude squeezed Rauda’s limp hand. “What are you talking about?”
“Ah, you’re just as foolish as your parents. We used you! Both of you!”

Hatred roiled in Hertrude's gut.
He sneered at her and laughed. "Wait, there may still be a chance. If I send them your head, the kingdom might spare me at least. I'll be the hero who stopped your tyranny!" The noble pulled out a pistol and aimed it at her, but suddenly the airship rocked hard to one side.
Hertrude's Magic Flute, which she'd dropped moments before, came rolling across the floor toward her.
"D-dammit!" The noble regained his balance and turned his gun back on Hertrude at the same instant she put her mouth to the Magic Flute.
All of you—every last one of you can just disappear! And she blew with all the strength she had.
Black smoke enveloped the air around Hertrude as monsters appeared again. One of them swooped down and sank its teeth into the noble's side.
"N-no, stop! Someone save me!" The monsters devoured the man as he shrieked.
Hertrude slowly pulled herself back to her feet, Magic Flute in hand. She staggered to the deck to survey the situation outside. She was so overwhelmed—by the truth of her parents' deaths, the actions of the nobleman, the loss of Rauda… Just what had they offered their lives for?
Her eyes were glassy as she stepped out toward the edge. The battle had resumed thanks to Vandel destroying the *Weiss*. As tears poured down her face, Hertrude played the flute once more, and an ominous melody rang through the air.
I've had enough. None of it matters anymore. All of you can die.
And with that, she summoned the Land Guardian.
Hertrude dropped the flute and cackled maniacally. "All of you, just disappear!"
The Land Guardian obliged her order, given in insanity, and began wreaking havoc.

***

Leon's father, Balcus, stood on the bridge of his ship, demanding answers. "Another one of those ridiculously enormous monsters has appeared! What in the world is going on?"
The moment he and his crew had charged the enemy ranks, they'd lost consciousness. By the time they came to, the Sky Giant had disappeared, but a new, mountainous monster was moving across the lake. Let's just say Balcus was having trouble keeping up.
Nicks, also on the bridge, pointed out the ship's window. "Father, there are other monsters now, too. And even more than before!"
"Deploy our Armors. I'm going out there."
"You can't," Nicks protested. "You have to stay and give orders. I—"
"Enough! Listen, you're my heir now. You have to be the one to stay. If something happens, it'll be up to you to protect our house and our family.

Understand?" *I can't let Nicks die,* Balcus thought as he tousled his son's hair. "If anything happens to me, you siblings need to look after each other. If Leon survives this, work him to the bone and protect our lands. He's competent, but he's also an idiot. Make sure you take care of him."
"No, you're asking way too much of me! And as long as you stay here, you won't need me to do that!"
"I'm not letting you brats die before me!" Balcus turned to his crew. "Look after Nicks."
With that, he left.

***

So the final boss did appear after all. To make matters worse, the Black Knight is ridiculously strong. I have no idea what the heck is going on here anymore! I swore and dodged again.
"Fiendish Kniiight!" Now that Gramps had taken down the *Weiss*, he was once again determined to chase me to the ends of the earth.
This isn't funny. Not one bit. This would only be acceptable if he were a cute girl!
"Tch!" I parried his attack with my axe, but the greatsword tore right through my weapon. "Missiles! All of them!"
"Launching all missiles," Luxion responded.
The container on the back of Arroganz opened again, sending a barrage of explosives toward the Black Knight. He put distance between us and dodged them all. Not only did he move sickeningly fast, but those stupid eyes of his launched fireballs to take down all my missiles, too.
The only weapon I still had was this axe. My shock wave attack required latching onto him, and I couldn't catch him.
"I'm using a cheat item, and I still can't beat him!"
Every time I thought I had him cornered, he turned the tables on me. I'd exhausted every tactic I could think of.
As if I wasn't preoccupied enough, the mountain-shaped Giant suddenly began shooting thorns out of its body. They sliced through the air and nailed several of the surrounding ships. It attacked kingdom and principality vessels alike, indiscriminate in its fury.
"What the…?"
Even the Black Knight panicked. "Princess!"
"Where's the *Partner*?!" I barked at Luxion.
"Enemies have intercepted it, keeping it too preoccupied to attack the Giant," he responded.
Knowing the *Partner* had attacked the previous Giant, the principality's forces had it under heavy fire.
"You morons! Focus on the beast killing both of us before you come after my ship!" I howled, taking a stance with my axe. I brought it down on the Black Knight, but he parried with his sword.

“I don’t have time to play with you anymore,” said Vandel. “Die already!”
“No thanks! I don’t wanna die in a place like this!” *Dying on a battlefield? Count me out.*
He scoffed. “You have neither the pride nor the dignity of a true knight. You really are a fiend!”
“So what? Don’t push your ‘pride and dignity’ crap on me!”
The *Partner* unleashed the last of its ammunition on the Giant just as Luxion’s shell of a body reported, “The *Partner*’s operating system has reached its limit.”
“Crap!”
The principality was concentrating fire on my ship, and as the *Partner*’s barrier fell, cannonballs slammed into it and set it ablaze. I could only watch as the *Partner* crashed into the lake below.
I owed Luxion a big apology for this.
The Black Knight’s blade sliced toward me. “This is the end for you!”
I readjusted my grip on the controls, ready to struggle until my last breath, but suddenly, Luxion’s voice changed—returning to that wonderful, snide, sarcastic normal. “I’m purging the container.”
“You’re back!”
As the Black Knight charged, Luxion released the container from my back, dropping it right into our enemy’s path. Vandel sliced through it, and the explosion engulfed the area.
However, now Arroganz’s mobility was significantly reduced. As in, my engine had been in that container. I’d be a sitting duck the next time the Black Knight attacked.
“Well, now that you’re suddenly here, what are we supposed to do?” I asked.
“Not a problem. Schwert will be here momentarily.”
As if on cue, my airbike descended from above. Although, its shape was a little different than I remembered.
“What’s that thing?”
“Schwert,” said Luxion.
“It sure doesn’t look like it!”
“Irrelevant.”
Schwert looked more like a plane or a shield now than a bike, depending on how you looked at it. It aligned itself with Arroganz’s back, connecting at the same spot my missile container had been moments ago. Suddenly, my Armor had wings.
“It’s combined with my Armor! Amazing!”
“It’s an improved version of the container, equipped with an enormous blade. Please use it.”
I pulled out the sword Luxion indicated. It looked just like the one the Black Knight wielded. “Can I really fight like this?”
“Of course. I have already updated Arroganz’s system.”

The Black Knight darted out of the cloud of smoke from the explosion, and I lowered our altitude to meet him. The upgrade had given such a boost to my Armor's speed that it was difficult to control.
"This is way too fast!"
"Please get used to it. Now commencing our attack."
Schwert shot a laser beam straight for the Black Knight—a curving laser that tracked his movements. You know, in defiance of physics.
"Did that laser just bend?!" I gaped.
"Please shut up. You'll bite your tongue."
What kind of AI treats his master like this? Here I was feeling lonely without him, but the first thing he does after coming back is piss me off.
"So, whelp, you still had a hidden weapon," Vandel growled.
I grinned and turned to him, brandishing my sword. "All right, Gramps—let's agree right now, the one who wins is the strongest. I better not hear any complaints from you!"

Chapter 11:
The Power of Love

THE ROYAL FAMILY'S SHIP, the *Weiss*, had sunk. With Leon's protection, Livia, Angie, and Marie narrowly escaped on a smaller rescue ship escorted by Marie's lovers. After dismounting from his Armor on the deck, the masked knight came to check on them.

"Looks like everyone's all right."

That said, Livia was completely drained and had to lean on Angie for support. Similarly, Carla supported Marie.

Angie turned to the masked knight. "You saved us. Thank you."

"No need. We have more pressing issues. The battle has resumed, and worse, we have a new Giant on our hands. Now that we've lost your ship and the *Partner*, I don't know how we'll deal with this one."

The *Partner* had pinned down the first Giant until Livia's power erased it, but now that ship had crashed, too. The destruction of the *Partner*, on which they had forged so many memories, made Angie's face twist in melancholy. She shook her head, her expression grave. The new Giant's unfettered aggression posed a dire threat; it had turned the fight into a three-way battle.

Jilk, still within his Armor, shot down a pair of encroaching monsters with his rifle. "It's too dangerous to stay here. We should retreat."

"Where do you propose we retreat to?!" Greg snapped. "We can't let that big, stupid monster get to the capital!"

"What chance do we stand against it? The *Partner* and the *Weiss* went down. There's no way to win!"

The masked knight, meanwhile, tracked the fierce battle unfolding between Arroganz and the Black Knight. His hands fisted. "Bartfort is preoccupied. We can't expect him to deal with the Giant. We must find some way to take care of this ourselves."

A terror and gloom fell upon them—how could they do anything but lose?

Marie lifted her head. "Wait a second. There *is* a way to win this!"

The masked knight turned to her, leaning in close. "Really, Marie?! Ahem, Lady Marie."

"Y-yeah. Remember the Magic Flute? If we have the person who used it play it again, that Giant should disappear. The only problem is…"

They had no idea where that person was. Even if they did, could they really convince them to play it again?

"I see…" The masked knight stroked his chin. "Looks like we'll have to use some persuasion."

That would be difficult as well.

Nonetheless, Livia raised her head. "Let's do it. We have to bring an end to this war."

“Livia, you need to rest. You can’t even stand by yourself,” said Angie.
Livia shook her head. “I want to. And—we’re the only ones who can.”
The other combatants were furiously reengaged with their enemies, and Leon was busy with the Black Knight. Furthermore, the disruption of the communication networks had resumed.
“We’re the only ones who can do this, huh?” The masked knight nodded in agreement. He turned to Kyle, who piloted their rescue vessel. “Take us to the Magic Flute user!”
Kyle’s eye twitched with annoyance. “Why do I have to follow *your* commands? Besides, I don’t even know where that person is!”
“Oh, about that… I know where they are,” said Cleare.
Everyone turned toward the white robot floating in the air.
“I have already confirmed their location. Allow me to guide you.”
Livia nodded. “Please, Cleary, take us there.”
“Oh, is that your nickname for me? Makes us sound like close friends. Well then, let’s be off.”
While Cleare gave directions, Kyle steered the ship through the smoke and fire of battle. “I sure hope I’m getting a bonus for driving a ship through the middle of a war,” he grumbled.
“Onward!” The masked knight struck a pose. “We’ll bring this battle to a close!”
“Doesn’t he act overfamiliar for a stranger?” Chris muttered.
Suddenly, a cloud of white robots swarmed through the air and gathered around their ship.
“Wh-what’s going on?!” the masked knight cried, alarmed.
“They’re bodyguards,” Cleare assured him. “It seems that sourpuss has returned.”
“Sourpuss?”
Ahead, a pillar of light shot down from the sky. It pierced right through the Giant, which erupted in a cloud of black smoke. Their little rescue ship disappeared inside the resulting cloud, charging on toward the principality’s flagship.
“What was that light just now?!”
“Ha ha ha!” Cleare struggled to compose herself. “It’s magic. Incredible magic!”
That was magic?! The masked knight frowned, bewildered.
“Our target has come into view.”
The masked knight squinted through the smoke billowing around them.
“The visibility is terrible. I can’t see anything.”
“If we don’t brake, we’ll slam right into it,” Cleare warned.
Flustered, Kyle slowed their ship, and as they broke through the darkness, the principality’s vessel came into view.
Brad reeled. “Hey, we’re going to hit it!”
Cleare chuckled, thoroughly enjoying herself. “It will be fine. At this speed, we can board safely.”

As they approached, they saw Hertrude sitting on the enemy ship's deck, protected by a horde of monsters all around her.
The masked knight hopped back into his Armor's cockpit. "I'll clear the way."
Angie, still supporting Livia on her shoulder, tilted her head at him and laughed. "As strange as your mask is, you're quite dependable."
"I'd thank you to call me the Masked Knight." Once he'd safely closed the hatch, he turned to the other boys. "Everyone, follow me!"
"Please stop giving us orders!" Jilk snapped, disgruntled.
Nevertheless, together, the four boys and the completely anonymous masked stranger defeated the monsters swarming the principality's ship. Finally, they were able to help Livia and Angie—and Marie—board the enemy vessel.

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Once the girls were safely on the principality's deck, they ran over to Hertrude. The masked knight and his comrades took up position to protect them from any untoward interference. Hertrude showed no sign of resistance as she sat there, alone, hands clasping her Magic Flute.
"Miss Hertrude, I have a favor to ask of you," said Livia. When she received no answer, she continued, "Please, stop this war. At this rate, everyone will die."
Still, Hertrude said nothing. Nor did she move.
Angie exploded. "Do you really want to keep struggling to your last breath? You have *lost*. Surrender!"
Marie gripped her Saint's Staff and scanned the area. The battle raged on, and it'd be no laughing matter if stray cannon fire came hurtling toward them. She grimaced.
Finally, Hertrude slowly lifted her head. Marie shrieked at the dark circles beneath her eyes.
"Let's end this," Livia continued, an earnest appeal. "We have to. At this rate, all of your people will die."
"They're already on the brink of total annihilation," Angie added. "Pull back now. That serves both of our interests. You can use that flute of yours to stop the Giant, right?"
Hertrude lowered her gaze, shoulders vibrating. As her grip tightened on the flute, she broke into hysterical laughter. "Ha ha ha! That's right. It'd be smarter to quit now, but I refuse!" She pulled herself to her feet and threw her arms wide. Despair was written across her face as she screamed. "If you want to kill me, do it! But killing me won't stop the Guardian. No matter how many times you destroy it, it will just revive. I wonder, how will you stand against an immortal being like that?"
Livia was not dissuaded. "But it's attacking the principality as well as the kingdom. If this keeps up—"

“So what?” Hertrude snapped.
“Huh?”
“All I can do is laugh. One of those foul nobles told me the truth—that they were only ever using Hertrauda and me. I don’t trust anyone anymore. Every one of you can just disappear for all I care!”
Livia stepped closer. “But you’re not alone! I’m sure there are other people who care deeply for you, Miss Hertrude.”
“There *were*! But soon, Vandel will die, too. And Rauda is… My one and only little sister is already gone.”
Shocked, Livia pulled back.
Hertrude laughed. “You know the price for summoning a Guardian? Your life. It didn’t matter that the Sea and Sky Guardians didn’t fulfill her orders. Once they disappeared, she died. You really played us well.”
Hertrauda had taken her last breath, then, robbed of all frustration, resentment, and hatred.
“You really are heartless,” Hertrude went on, “playing with our emotions like that. You’re the lowest of the low.”
Livia’s gaze fell to the ground.
“Enough of your nonsense,” Angie snapped. “Are you really going to pretend you have no responsibility in all of this?”
“It shouldn’t take your life if you blow the flute again,” Marie timidly interjected. “A-at least I don’t think it will.”
Hertrude turned her gaze to Marie. “How clever. I suppose if I stopped it before it fulfilled my order, its *death* wouldn’t kill me. Of course, I’d never be able to use the Magic Flute again, and the Guardian would attempt to kill me instead… Not that I’d particularly care. I simply want to destroy this useless world before I go—to avenge my sister’s death!”
Livia shook her head. “Even if you feel that way, this is wrong. What good will avenging her do? Your sister wouldn’t have wanted that!”
“Oh, shut it, you dingbat!” Marie spat.
Livia and Angie gaped in surprise. Even Hertrude’s eyes went round with shock.
Marie got right up in Livia’s face, holding her staff in one hand, her other pressed to her chest. “What does it matter if she’s in the wrong? Sure, maybe to *you* it seems messed up, but not to her! And what do you know about what Hertrauda really wanted? Nothing? Then stop acting like you get to speak for her! It’s arrogant!”
Livia bit her lip. “But at this rate, no one will be happy with—”
Marie wouldn’t give her an inch. “So you’re telling her to give up on overcoming her enemies and just be miserable? To forsake vengeance because it’s ‘wrong’? What about how she feels, huh?! Real cocky to lecture her like this when you’ve never had to stand there silently while someone you cared about was killed! Although since revenge is ‘wrong,’ of course you wouldn’t do anything about it, right?”
“I—I—”

“Have you ever lost anyone you love? Ever experienced all the regret that comes with their death?” Marie snarled. “It’s painful. When someone you love is taken from you, it feels like your heart is being ripped from your chest! Everything you say is so cheap. Good girls like you may talk pretty, but your words ring hollow!”
“Whose side are you on?!” Angie cut in. “I couldn’t care less about her revenge. Our priority right now is stopping that monster!”
“Shut up! If the world is so weak that a single Giant can crush it, then it might as well go down in flames right now!” Marie shrieked. Her words came from the heart, and they seethed.
Angie flinched back, but even still, Marie wouldn’t stop.

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Marie was livid. Those who preached against vengeance only denounced it because it was *convenient* for them.

I absolutely loathe this hypocrite. She did the same thing in the game, spouting all those ideals. Sounded like a bunch of lies to me then, too! You wanna claim that "war is wrong," and "people shouldn't take revenge"? Go get your brain checked!

"You think she doesn't know that Giant is going to hurt people? That she's going to be responsible for their deaths? She's going through with it anyway because none of that is enough to stop her from avenging her sister!"

Even Marie didn't know why she was defending the enemy princess. But she couldn't sit by while Angie and Livia lectured Hertrude for "being in the wrong." Marie knew regret. She had grown far too familiar with it in her previous life—especially after her brother died.

"And how does that justify killing hundreds of people?" Angie glared at Marie. "Look around us! The battle is *over*." She turned to Hertrude. "If we keep this up, you'll just be killing other people's loved ones for the sake of killing them. These deaths don't stop unless we act. Don't you understand?!"

Marie stared around. The principality's forces held up white flags. The kingdom's army continued to engage the Giant, and only a few vessels still remained airborne. Those who had fallen in battle, knights and soldiers alike, had family and friends, too—people waiting for them to come home, who would never again see their loved ones.

Marie found herself losing the will to argue.

"There's no point in fighting anymore," Angie said to Hertrude. "If you pull back now, there's still a chance to resolve this diplomatically. Continuing now is pointless."

"This is now a war of attrition, one you will lose—will you continue it nevertheless?" Angie asked.

Even if the principality managed to regain their strength, they had lost too many troops to truly fight back any time soon. Another country would doubtless target them in this weakened state and destroy them utterly.

"Fanoss House was once part of the Holfort royal family," said Angie. "You have position. Leverage. Surrender and we can negotiate."

Hertrude laughed tonelessly. "I'm sure you're right, but all that awaits us in surrender is slavery at your hands."

Such was the fate of a country that lost a war.

"But you'll be alive," Livia said. "Those soldiers have people waiting for them back home. Please don't let any more of them die needlessly."

Marie bit her lip. None of this sounded wrong—but where did that leave Hertrude?

Then Hertrude spoke. “I never thought your pathetic Saint would speak in my defense. Why are you trying to protect someone like me? If it hadn’t been for you…I would never have had to experience all these feelings.”
Having said her piece, Hertrude raised the flute to her lips and blew once more. A soft melody carried through the air.
“Are you sure about this?” Marie asked.
As Hertrude pulled her lips away, the flute crumbled to dust. She chuckled. “It chafes to give up on my revenge, but seeing you defend me cooled my head. You’re right. I knew this didn’t have any meaning, but I couldn’t stop myself. I just don’t understand why…why did this have to happen to us?”
Tears streamed down Hertrude’s cheeks, and she sank to the ground. Marie knelt beside her and put her arms around the foreign princess.
Gradually, the fighting around them had ceased. The air went silent but for the wind.
Hertrude wiped away her tears. “The principality…surrenders.”
“An enemy unit is rapidly approaching!” Cleare cut in. “Be careful, everyone!”
The five Armored boys surrounding them went on the alert, but a black Armor slammed down onto the deck between them. Vandel. His suit was crumbling around him, liquid dripping down its outer plating.
“Get away from the princess, kingdom scum!” he hissed.
A wave of eyes flared open all over his suit, glaring at them all.
“Creepy,” Marie mumbled.
“Vandel, that’s enough.” Hertrude lifted her head, weeping. “Let’s put an end to this. You fought so well for me. I’m so grateful, but it’s all right now. You don’t have to do this anymore.”
But the Black Knight refused to concede. “Princess, they’ve deceived you.”
“Vandel?”
“Don’t worry. Stay here and watch as I destroy them all.” He lifted himself up, more black ooze gushing from his suit like blood pouring from open wounds.
“No, Vandel, it’s over!” Hertrude shouted.
“I won’t let it be *over*!”
The masked knight swung his sword, but the Black Knight deflected. The other boys charged as well, but none were any match for Vandel.
“It can’t end,” he repeated. “I won’t allow it to. I haven’t avenged my family. Nothing is over until the kingdom’s people taste the same despair I felt when I lost my wife and daughter!” He lurched toward Marie and the girls.
As if in synchrony, the fully regenerated Giant lumbered closer as well.
Is this the end? Marie stared up at these twin horrors. More than anything, it saddened her to think that her second life had been as riddled with mistakes as her first.
Livia threw herself in front of them, arms spread wide. “Please, stop this!”
“You idiot, what are you doing?!” Marie tried to drag her back.

“You’re that girl from the white ship.” The Black Knight lifted his blade overhead. “All the more reason to kill you. I can’t let you live.”
Marie threw her staff arm forward and channeled her power to conjure a desperate magic shield.
“So this is all your Saint amounts to, is it?!” The Black Knight shattered it with his fist.
“Vandel, enough, stop!” Hertrude cried, but the Black Knight brought his sword swinging down toward Livia.
“Livia!” Angie leaped forward to protect her friend.
Marie squeezed her eyes shut. *Bubby, save them!*
And, as if on cue: “I’m going to tear you to pieces, you stupid old fart!”

***

A squadron of the principality’s Armors had surrounded me in an attempt to assist the Black Knight in his final efforts.
“Fools, getting in my way.”
I destroyed them all. But once I had, my last opponent was nowhere to be found. I flew through the air, searching for him—until I finally spotted him on the deck of the enemy’s flagship.
Livia was there—as was Angie, and Marie. Vandel raised his sword, about to cut them down.
All the blood rushed to my head. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?! I’ll tear you to pieces, you stupid old fart!”
I careened through the air at full force and body-slammed the Black Knight. He went reeling.
“It’s not over!” he howled. “I won’t let it be over! I’m going to kill all those kingdom scum!”
Luxion’s eye moved from side to side. “He’s lost his mind. The suit has taken over him.”
Corrupted by demonic influence, the Black Knight brandished his greatsword at me.
“Master, it’s about time we brought this to a close. The Giant is headed this way.”
I lifted my sword and accelerated toward the Black Knight, with Luxion providing support. “Time to say nighty night, Gramps!”
Our blades clashed again and again, and each time I adjusted my attacks, adapting to his style. As we fought, I noticed the charm hanging from my neck was glowing.
“Bastard!” the Black Knight cried.
Simultaneously, each of our swords bit through the other’s Armor. His sunk deep into Arroganz’s shoulder, while mine plunged right through his abdomen.
“Luxion, now!”
“Initiating impact!”

My blade pulsed red, and light burst through the Black Knight's Armor.
It was like a water balloon had popped. Black liquid sprayed everywhere, and the old man plummeted to the deck below.
The left arm of my suit was broken, but it had the power to grab for him. All I managed to catch hold of was his Armor's right arm.
An eye blinked open on the Black Knight's severed arm. The moment it spotted me, its pupil darted here and there in a panic—like it was terrified of Arroganz.
"Ready whenever, Master."
I tossed the arm up in the air, and a beam of light from the clouds above blew it to pieces.
"Satisfied?" I asked.
"Yes. Now all that's left is that thing."
We turned our gaze to the moving mountain—the giant monster Hertrude had summoned.
"Let's take it out in style!"
"Indeed," Luxion agreed. "I think that would be best."
I stowed my sword and then threw Arroganz's arms out wide.

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Vandel crashed to the deck of the principality's flagship, and Hertrude raced to his side.
"Vandel!" she cried, clinging to him.
His eyes slid open, but when he reached his hand to his stomach, it came away coated in blood. His right arm was gone, too.
"Ah…so I've lost." The old man turned his gaze to the princess and smiled. *That brat's stronger now than the first time we fought.* "Princess, I'm sorry, but—"
"Just don't leave me!" she wailed.
"It looks like this is the end for me."
Vandel looked up toward the sky just as Leon spread Arroganz's arms wide to prepare an attack. Dozens of magical circles appeared in the air, stacking atop one another. Vandel didn't know much about magic, but he could surmise this was a powerful spell, whatever it was. The light from the circles glowed so beautifully.
He watched as the light condensed into concentrated energy, and electrical discharge sparked from the joints of Leon's suit. He was pushing his Armor to its limits. Finally, he released his spell.
It hit the Guardian dead center.
A massive explosion rocked the deck beneath him, and as smoke engulfed the principality ship, Vandel realized the battle was really over.
Arroganz spiraled toward the lake below, bits of the suit on fire, and Livia and Angie rushed to their rescue vessel to save Leon's falling body.

Marie remained. She inched over to Vandel and Hertrude, her eyes glued on the princess. Something in her anxious stare brought Vandel some relief.
Worried about our princess? Well, if you have people like that looking out for you, then you'll be all right, Your Highness. My quest for revenge is over now. It's time for me to rejoin my family…
Vandel coughed up blood, then smiled as his eyes closed for the last time.

***

Arroganz floated on the surface of the lake, having activated a flotation ring. Inside the cockpit, Luxion and I gazed up at the sky together.
"Hey, do you think I made the right choices?"
Like, if I hadn't sent Luxion to the underbelly of the continent to deal with the Sea Giant, could we have saved more people? I'd made that choice for sound logical reasons, factoring in all kinds of risks, but I still couldn't know if they were the most correct.
"If you'd exposed my main body to the kingdom, you would have spent the rest of your life always looking over your shoulder," Luxion said. "Besides, given the state of the kingdom, it would have been too dangerous to send any of them to deal with the Sea Guardian. But you couldn't ignore it either. Perhaps your choices weren't the best, merely better than the alternative."
Other damaged ships and Armors floated on the water, too. Seeing all that destruction, I had to wonder, *Couldn't I have found a better way?*
"In the end, I wasn't able to use you to your full potential," I concluded.
"I will agree with that. But consider this a learning experience—an opportunity to improve for the future."
"And so many people died. There's so much blood on my hands."
"Man has fought throughout all of recorded history and will continue to do so. Fear not, Master, this is only the beginning."
I frowned. "That's not the least bit reassuring."
"Yes, well, I'm not exactly skilled at comforting people."
"I'm definitely going to hell."
"Most certainly," said Luxion, "assuming it exists. Shall we go together?"
I shook my head. "You seem like you'd pick a fight with King Enma, so I'll pass. I don't need you making my sins any worse than they already are."
"I would like to remind you that normally, *you* are the one picking a fight with everyone, Master."
"Idiot, I know how to tell the difference between who I can and can't piss off. Plus, I'm good at brownnosing. I better start thinking of a way to flatter King Enma right now."
"I should expect no less from you. You are depraved beyond words."
At least our absurd conversation was distracting me from everything I was feeling.
"The fact remains that your actions saved many people's lives," said Luxion. "Both the principality and the kingdom are exhausted. It will be difficult for

them to continue fighting now. Ultimately, I do think you did a satisfactory job. You also managed to make it seem like Arroganz and the *Partner* are out of commission. Depending on how you play things from here, you might be able to get that peaceful life you always wanted."

If I were really the protagonist of the story, we'd probably all get to have a happy ending. Alas, I would receive no such thing. Such was the fate of a background character. But if there was a protagonist out there who could save the world, I was still committed to doing everything I could to kiss up to them.

So if you're out there, please save me. I don't care who you are, as long as you can rescue me. The hero role is too big for this pitiful NPC.

"I wish I could have done a better job. It's my fault things turned out this way."

"War would have broken out between the two countries regardless of your involvement," said Luxion. "You give yourself too much credit."

Is this his way of trying to comfort me? Irksome as he was, I liked him better now than when he sounded like an emotionless robot. "Sorry about the *Partner* and the *Weiss*," I said. "They both went down."

"I can retrieve and repair the *Partner*. As for the *Weiss*, its psychic attack is too dangerous for my liking. Whatever system amplified Livia's power must have been added to the ship after its initial construction. I saw no indication of it in the original manual."

"Being able to stop a whole war with the power of love *is* pretty terrifying. And even scarier is having your willpower to fight zapped right out of you."

Luxion agreed. "I believe it would be best to leave that ship be. Otherwise, you risk putting Olivia and Angelica in further danger. I now understand why the kingdom hid their secret weapon."

Yeah, I didn't ever want to make them go through something like that again. If we repaired the ship—especially that psychic attack component—Livia and Angie would doubtless be targeted for assassination. For their sake, it was better to let people think the *Weiss* was beyond recovery.

"I don't want them using it again," I said. "So much for love."

"A wise decision, Master. But in a way, wasn't it love that ended the battle?"

I raised a brow. "You still going to call a psychic attack *love*? I was pretty grossed out, personally."

"But did you not help those two out of love? The desire to protect your family and the people you know is a form of love as well. That was precisely what led the kingdom to victory."

"Yeah, just wonderful. But wasn't it love that started this whole thing?"

"There were a number of reasons for the conflict, but the ability to manipulate someone's love was an effective one, yes. After all, you can readily incite the masses if you frame war as protecting their family and loved ones."

"Makes me wanna barf." I made a gagging sound.

“People fight for love. They put their lives on the line for others. Truly a wonderful thing, isn’t it?” Luxion was clearly being facetious.
Just then, a small vessel descended toward the scraps of Arroganz. It landed on the water’s surface, creating waves that rippled around me. Livia and Angie were on the deck, tears in their eyes.
“Uh? Do they think I’m dead or something?”
“Instead of cracking wise, why not hurry up and comfort them?” Luxion suggested condescendingly. “And do make up your mind before I lose my patience. You love those two, don’t you?”
“Idiot. I wouldn’t be this cautious with them if I didn’t.”
It was less a matter of me being able to make up my mind and more like I didn’t dare put my hands on them if I couldn’t follow through all the way—you know, get married to them. I was the faithful type, after all.
“I’ve done enough hard work to last a lifetime,” I said. “I just want to live in peace from now on.”
“Peaceful future or not, I don’t believe you will be able to escape them.”
“Do you really think I deserve them, though? There’s way better guys out there. And they’ve got each other.”
“That’s for the two of them and you to decide. Although, if it’s a financial concern, you should put that aside. That’s why I’m here.”
“Wow, thanks. I’m so happy I think I could cry.”
Arroganz’s hatch popped open, and I stepped out onto the flotation device. Livia and Angie leaped down from their vessel, throwing their arms around me in a tight embrace.
“Leon!”
“You big idiot!”
I looped my arms around them as they clung to me. “I didn’t really plan a speech for this moment, so, uh… Hey, I’m back!”
Tears streamed down Livia’s face as she buried her face in my chest.
“Please don’t make me worry like that!”
“Oh? You were worried about me?”
Angie pinched my arm, though I didn’t feel much of anything through my pilot suit. “Enough with the jokes. Why did you run away from us back then?”
“Back when?”
“When we were underground—when that machine confirmed that Livia and I—that we love each other.” Her cheeks reddened with embarrassment. It made me want to tease her.
“Eh, you know, I didn’t want to get in the way,” I said.
“Who said you’d be in the way?! Never say that again. You’re incredibly important to both of us!”
Always one to interrupt a moment, my father’s airship landed in the water beside us. Apparently they had come to retrieve me as well.
The battle was truly over. All that remained was cleaning up and tying a few loose ends.

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Things were settled quickly once we returned to the capital. The kingdom agreed to peace with the principality, as other countries were gunning to invade at every one of our borders. We didn't have the forces or supplies to deal with Fanoss more punitively. Still, the principality did cease to exist as an independent nation. Fanoss House was reincorporated into the kingdom and forced to sign a pretty humiliating treaty, including reparations for their transgressions and a guarantee of military support for the kingdom. Fines would be levied against them if they failed to comply. The kingdom would also be sending one of its own to keep an eye on Fanoss.

Honestly, the treatment Fanoss House got was worse than any of the other regional lords. They were in a precarious state and would suffer the repercussions of their actions for the next several centuries.

While the other nobles finalized decisions at the palace, I was otherwise preoccupied—politics had little to do with me.

"Lord Leon, you were extraordinary out there."

"Yes, like a hero!"

"Please, regale us with your exploits."

Instead, I was surrounded by a number of young women.

"Ah ha ha! I wish you could have seen me in action. I shredded those principality bastards and tore them to pieces! Tiny, tiny pieces!"

Incidentally these girls weren't students of the academy—at least not yet. They would be starting next term. They were all high-ranking nobility, which meant they didn't have any slaves and knew little of the world. Pure and untainted, unlike the refuse at school. Considering who their fathers were, I was sure they had their own aims for approaching me, but this was still pretty pleasant.

Nothing beats being doted on like this!

These adorable girls visited me daily while I was cooped up in the palace. Rather than second-guess their motives, I had decided to live in the moment.

"When we start attending the academy next year, you'll be a year ahead of us," said one of the girls.

"It's like a dream, being able to attend the same school as you."

"I'm really looking forward to your tea parties, Lord Leon."

I struggled to contain my glee; they were so cute! So unsullied and untouched—so different from the girls at the academy. Was this the true beginning of my life here? Maybe with the war over, I would be released from the curse of that stupid otome game!

"I can't wait for all of you to start attending," I said.

Their cheeks flushed red.

The rest of the student population still detested me, but I was extremely popular outside of the academy. I couldn't stop grinning. When I first

reincarnated into this world, it had been a cruel matriarchy. Now, I stood a real chance of building my own harem. I was on cloud nine!
As I indulged myself, Queen Mylene suddenly popped out of nowhere.
“Viscount Bartfort, might I have a word?”
“Your Majesty!”
She wore a grave expression, eyes full of sadness and unease.
Augh, stop. Don’t look at me like that.
The other girls read the atmosphere and slipped out of the room. I was left feeling like an adulterer who’d been caught red-handed.
“Uh, Y-Your Majesty, I can explain…”
“I understand.”
“Huh?”
Was she really being understanding about me getting carried away because some girls were fawning over me? That was awfully open-minded of her. She was too perfect.
“You were trying to distract yourself, weren’t you? We put you through a lot. I heard it was a brutal fight. It must have been so hard on you.”
Okay, maybe she completely misunderstood my motives, but she did understand the gravity of what I’d gone through.
I shrugged. “I’m no match for you. Although, you know, partly, I was just happy to have them dote on me like that. Definitely not an experience you get at the academy.”
“Yes, you are like any other man in that respect,” she said as she settled in the seat in front of me. “Do you remember? I told you I would reveal everything later.”
“Yes, before I went into battle. I’m guessing that time is now?”
She nodded, adjusting her posture as she looked directly into my eyes. “Can you accept everything I’m about to tell you, Viscount Bartfort? The truth is bitter and merciless.”
She did say something about this having to do with why the kingdom became the way it is. Does that mean there’s actually an explanation for this otome game’s twisted premise? I sat up a little straighter. “I’m not an innocent little boy. I’m ready to hear whatever you have to say.”
I would later regret how easily those words left my mouth.
“Very well. I’ll start by telling you about the events that led up to this conflict, and then how things have turned out in the aftermath.”

Chapter 12:
The Cruel Truth

“IT BEGAN WITH the archduke’s rebellion. You know by now that when a person is on the defensive, it puts them at a serious disadvantage, yes?”
“Yes. Considering our objective during this battle was to defend the capital, we had it rough,” I said.
Queen Mylene nodded. “The archduke caused great suffering for the royal family. We feared another noble might follow his example. As a regional lord yourself, I am sure you must have realized it as well. Anyone above a baron rank can rapidly amass military power.”
“By increasing the number of airships at their disposal, right? I heard that years ago they used to accumulate power by conquering neighboring houses.”
Airships gave attacking combatants a clear advantage in this world. And Suspension Stones made it shockingly
cheap and efficient to create and maintain airships. So, with their cheap airships, regional lords could gather power and duke it out with each other for more land—always on the offensive, never having to defend. Even a baron could be a threat to the kingdom if they were resourceful enough.
Queen Mylene confirmed that was how things had once been. “Some regional lords holed themselves up in their own regions, but many grew bold and launched attacks on the capital itself.”
Those stupid enough to try had been defeated, but as the defender was always at a disadvantage, the kingdom had also suffered significant losses.
“The kingdom established the academy as a way to demonstrate its power outside of battle. We could discourage regional lords from ever opposing us by showing the difference in our strength.”
Luxion had mentioned something along those lines once. But what did that have to do with the truth underlying the world? If I remembered right, Luxion had said something about the kingdom pushing the burden off onto men.
“And,” continued the queen, “the kingdom designed an additional strategy. In order to further chip away at the power of the regional lords, they strove to instill a new value system.”
“Uh, what kind of value system?”
“Do you understand why women are treated immensely better than men in this country?”
“I don’t—”
“Because of all the war, men were in short supply,” she said. “It isn’t as noticeable at the academy, but after graduation, the imbalance becomes dramatically more apparent. In fact, women can’t get married at all.”

In that case, why *did* women have more power when it came to marriage? Normally, simple supply and demand would put men in the position to pick and choose. *Wait a minute. Was this male population shortage the reason Zola tried to marry me off before I entered the academy?*

The pieces were falling into place.

"We arranged things so nobles who attended the academy would develop the same set of values. Cruel as it was, we enforced the tradition of absurd favoritism toward women in the kingdom."

Hold on just a second. You're telling me the kingdom did this on purpose?!

"W-wait, stop for a moment. What's the point of doing that? I mean, come on! By undermining the nobles like that, they wouldn't be able to perform as assets when you actually needed them!"

That was exactly the issue we'd just run into trying to fend off the principality. Some of the boys in my position had even tried to switch sides.

"Please, be calm," said the queen. "Our predecessors admittedly failed to predict those complications. They only hoped that with shared values and a sense of camaraderie, the regional lords would lose a bit of the seditious impulses they previously fostered. However, the effects of their policies far exceeded their expectations. Women grew…arrogant."

Displaying the kingdom's strength via the academy *had* drastically reduced the number of idiots trying to revolt. But the balance of power had shifted more dramatically than the kingdom anticipated. Now the favoritism system had warped the entire system of marriage.

"And no one stopped to think, 'Hey, maybe we should fine-tune this a bit'?" I asked.

"They didn't think it necessary at the time. In fact, if I had been alive back then, I probably would have missed the unintended consequences as well. The political outcomes were too convenient for the kingdom to think that deeply about it. The regional nobles were drained, financially and mentally, and wealth was concentrated in the capital. Revolts all but vanished." The queen's tone was flat. "Also, the kingdom had one other objective for establishing a center for education."

Wait, I know I tuned Luxion out when he was talking about it, but I think he brought this up before, too.

"By establishing the academy, we devised a means for the common people to receive an education alongside the nobility. You understand what that means, don't you?"

I averted my gaze.

She smiled. "In a few more centuries, this world will no longer need the nobility."

Crap. I did *not* want to hear all of this. If I wasn't careful now, they might decide to get rid of me so I wouldn't leak the truth.

"When the academy was first established, our predecessors thought to revolutionize our political structure over the course of several centuries. Well, I'm sure they felt it was the only way forward."

In other words, since the royal family had grown tired of dealing with the nobility, they figured they might as well overhaul the entire political structure of the country.

What the hell? Weren't they thinking way too far ahead?

"It was a dark time. Like the archduke's family, other nobles were filled with greed and ambition. You have dealt with your peers, I'm sure you must understand, Viscount Bartfort."

There were some good nobles, sure, but there were far more scumbags that made you shake your head in disgust. In fact, most seemed to want to accumulate power so they could climb the social ladder—unlike me.

"We tried to correct the heirs' way of thinking while at the academy. The aristocracy could have continued if nobles behaved themselves. Alas, the royal family failed to predict the outcome of their design."

Once again, that favoritism scheme had screwed it all up.

"The girls of noble families of earl rank and below ran amok, letting power go to their heads. The situation has devolved far beyond our expectations."

Which leads us to how things are at present… "Yeah, that is pretty brutal."

"Indeed," she agreed. "However, it also means regional nobles' fortunes are concentrated here in the capital. These women who want to live in luxury in the city continue to play a convenient role for the royal family. And that is what created such a burden on men in this kingdom."

Okay, so if I had this straight—the kingdom didn't trust the nobles, so it designed a future where aristocrats were obsolete, and they let the noble girls run wild at school because, hey, they'd be thrown out soon enough when the revolution came.

Ha, was that why the highest-class girls were forbidden from owning slaves? Did their families suspect—or even know—about the change that was coming? After all, if they kept their daughters in check, they were in a better position to assume political roles in the new government to come.

In any case, I could see why the royal family had thought they'd always be able to rein the situation back under their control, given their secret psychic attack ship.

I'd never dreamed the academy's messiness was the result of intentional political maneuvering. I'd have to tell Luxion about all this later and ask him to explain the finer points to me.

Also…

"Is that the reason you had Livia enroll at the academy?" I asked.

"We thought it was time to move to the next step of our long-term plan. The nobles needed to feel threatened. We intended to start with Olivia and gradually increase the number of common folk enrolled every year. Every move we make is with an eye to the future a hundred, or even two hundred years from now."

Hadn't I learned about this in Japan? The next step after feudalism was centralized authoritarian rule—in other words, an absolute monarch, right?

"You mean centralization."

“Oh, yes. That’s a good, frank way of capturing what the royal family is aiming for.”
She was complimenting me, but I wasn’t the least bit happy about it. The royal family planned to take everything from regional lords like me and give the nobles’ jobs away to the common people.
“Sadly, things aren’t going quite the way we’d planned.” Queen Mylene gave a self-deprecating smile.
Stop. Don’t put me on the spot like this. Were they getting rid of me after telling me all this top secret information? If the noblemen learned of this, they’d snap and go berserk. I knew blaming the current royal family wouldn’t do any good since this had been decided long ago, but what a mess!
“Heroes like you really are of a different caliber,” the queen was saying. “I was completely dumbstruck when I first heard all of this, but you’re quite calm, Leon. I thought you might curse at me. I couldn’t have blamed you if you did.”
I was only silent because I was inwardly panicking, but apparently that had given her the wrong impression.
“I have one more thing to speak to you about. Not as the queen but as Mylene.” She stood from her chair and knelt on the floor, bowing her head as she prostrated herself before me.
Wait, what? She’s kowtowing?! I didn’t think they did that here in this world? Maybe she’s just mimicking the way I apologized during the school festival?
“H-hold on a minute! Stop right there, please. What’s this about, all of a sudden?”
“Viscount Bartfort, I realize it’s impertinent of me to ask this of you, but please, I beg of you… Won’t you save Julius for me? As his mother, I implore you.”
What’s that idiot done this time?!

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There were six of them in the dungeons—Marie, Julius, Jilk, Brad, Chris, and Greg—waiting silently for their punishments to be handed down.
“I’m sorry, everyone,” sobbed Marie.
“Don’t even worry about it,” Julius reassured her. “This was the only thing I could do to help you.”
Jilk’s expression was tinged with sadness. “It’s unfortunate you couldn’t join us on the battlefield, Your Highness, but at least a man calling himself the ‘Masked Knight’ helped us out.”
“Yeah, although he just up and disappeared on us after the battle was over,” Brad grumbled bitterly. “He was pretty skilled, though.”
Greg sat cross-legged, a hand on his chin. “I wouldn’t say he was as good as Julius, but he was pretty capable.”

Chris nodded. “I’ve never seen the Armor he used before, but his sword technique wasn’t bad. I never did figure out who he was in the end. Bartfort seemed to know something about him.”
Julius smiled quietly. “Really? I wish I could have met him then.”
“That’s completely unnecessary,” said Jilk. “The man came out of nowhere and took immediate command. If we do meet him again, we need to find out his true identity.”
Marie watched their exchange, utterly exasperated. *Surely you guys can’t be serious?* “Guys, that masked knight was Juli—”
Footsteps echoed as someone approached, cutting her off. The knights guarding them saluted, and the man who entered motioned for them to leave. A woman with black hair followed him into the dungeon.
“Ah!” Marie’s eyes lit up when she recognized the man—Leon! Princess Hertrude—no, that wasn’t her title anymore—Lady Hertrude lingered a few steps behind him.
“You’re all complete morons. I’m seriously pissed at you guys,” Leon groused.
Marie clung to the bars of their cell. “I really did try my best, I swear! Please save me!”
Leon massaged his temples as if dealing with a migraine. “Do you guys understand what they’re charging you with?”
Julius looked Leon straight in the face. “We have nothing to be ashamed of.”
“Well, you sure should be! We barely finish signing a treaty with the daughter of Fanoss House and our prince suddenly launches a surprise attack on her? How ridiculous is that?! You’ve brought shame on the entire palace!”
Hertrude sighed, eyes glued to the floor. “You did it for me, didn’t you?”
“That was part of it,” Julius admitted. “That treaty was unreasonably cruel. The way things were going, I would have had to marry into your house. Besides, Marie requested that I intervene.” She had wanted to do something to help out the former principality’s territory.
“Ah, so that’s the real reason.”
The palace wanted to keep the newly minted Fanoss dukedom under their thumb by sending them Julius. If they forced Hertrude to marry him, it might soften her people’s animosity toward the kingdom, making them easier to control. Julius had launched a staged attack to prevent this from happening. It had been a complete embarrassment for the palace, and they’d had to make concessions in their treaty as a result. That included, of course, ending all talk of Julius marrying into Hertrude’s house.
Although I would have been fine with them marrying, Marie thought to herself.
Leon turned his gaze to the other four. “And do the rest of you understand what *you* did wrong?”
Greg wiped a finger under his nose, trying to keep a cool facade. “We did it to protect Marie. There’s nothin’ for me to regret.”

“You *should* feel regret! Did you seriously drive out the temple officials who came to fetch her? Are you an idiot? Come on, be honest with me. You’re all morons, aren’t you?!”
Chris held his head up proudly. “It was legitimate self-defense.”
“You went too far,” Leon insisted. “Now the temple is protesting to the crown about your actions! I had everything planned out, and you screwed it all up!”
The temple officials who’d come to Marie after the battle had only been meant to retrieve the three holy items she held. However, some among them had deemed her a liability; they’d brought poisoned alcohol and tried to force her to drink it. Four of her boys had stopped them, however, and driven all the temple officials out of the palace, even the ones who hadn’t been involved with the poison. That in itself was a problem, but Marie doubted even Leon could fault the boys for that.
“Look, those items identified Marie as the Saint,” said Leon. “Whether she calls herself a fake or not, there’s no mistake that she *is* the Saint. You with me so far?”
Marie blushed. “What, really? Aww, I guess I really am the Saint then.”
“Yeah, and the Saint’s lovers just drove a bunch of priests out of the palace—that’s the real problem here! You didn’t ask any questions, you just chased them all away. Now the temple’s getting riled up and insisting they won’t recognize Marie as the Saint anymore.”
Hertrude opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something but ended up just closing it again.
“Do you even realize how many strings I was pulling in the background trying to make this all work?” Leon went on. “Answer me. Why did you have to ruin all of my efforts?”
Brad leaped to his feet. “Are you telling us we should have just let them kill Marie?! None of us could accept that!”
“Okay, what you did *there* was justified. Those losers did try to poison her. Even I think they were total fools. But that doesn’t mean you should have driven them out and caused a fuss! You went at them with your fists swinging—*that* makes you all idiots.”
Marie interjected, “Hold on! The temple tried to execute me. They were only preventing that from happening.”
“But then they got their Armors and went on a rampage! That’s not prevention, that’s just violence! After the temple’s little poisoning stunt, I had things all lined up to work out perfectly, and you all ruined it!”
To hear Leon tell it, the palace officials considered the six of them serious eyesores.
“You have it rough,” Hertrude said to Leon. “Care to stay with me? I can still promise you favorable treatment. I’m happy to prepare a place for you in my territory.”
“Not interested.” Leon immediately stepped closer to Marie.

Hertrude's forehead wrinkled with disappointment. She mustered a sad smile. "I was being genuine this time, but you turned me down again."
"You know what they're calling you?" Leon asked Marie. "A fearsome witch—for enticing five *former* heirs."
"Aww, they really said that?" Marie fidgeted, cheeks going red.
"Because of all of you, the palace is flooded with appeals! Your houses are absolutely livid," Leon berated the boys, "the palace officials refuse to forgive what you've done, and the temple is so furious that they're demanding you all be executed!"
Marie latched on to Leon's ankle. "Please save us!"
"I *tried* to save you! But again, I reiterate, you all ruined everything!" Leon spat. "You have a grudge against me, don't you? How did you guys even get yourselves into this mess? I'm at a total loss here—as is everyone else!" He looked like he was on the verge of tears.
"We were just trying to do what we could to stop it!" Marie protested. "And it just got kind of messed up along the way."
"This is a disaster! Think before you act!"
Tears poured down her cheeks. "Does that mean we're all going to die?"
Leon opened his mouth but then seemed to swallow whatever he was going to say next. He turned his back to them. "I asked Queen Mylene for her help. I'll do everything I can, but don't get your hopes up."
Marie smiled. This was the big brother she knew from her previous life. Once Leon got involved, things always worked out. *Thank you, Bubby!*

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I made my way to the king to see about resolving the incident with Marie and her love interests. Seated with His Majesty were Mr. Vince and Minister Bernard. They all wore disapproving looks when they heard my plea.
"It seems you don't understand the gravity of your request." The king's voice was cold—come on, it was his own son's life hanging in the balance!
"You can keep all of the reward money you intended to give me after the war. If that's not enough, I'll supplement whatever else you need from my own fortune," I said.
The king snorted. "I hear you transferred the right to your workshop over to your father. As for your Lost Items, they were destroyed. What pittance you have left is inconsequential. To top it all off, you destroyed the royal family's ship as well, did you not? Shouldn't *you* be taking responsibility for all that?"
Ugh, his malicious nitpicking was insufferable. The *Partner* and Arroganz could both be repaired, but I wasn't going to tell them as much. Unfortunately, it was more convenient for me to keep them in the dark.
"Still, I beg of you," I said.
His Majesty leaned back haughtily in his chair, smirking down at me.

This jerk really has some kind of grudge against me, doesn't he?
Minister Bernard said, "Sparing their lives is simple, but we can't simply leave them unchecked. Prince Julius is still royalty. The other four are also former heirs. On top of that, they have the 'fake' Saint with them."
The king whipped around to stare at Minister Bernard in disbelief, but Mr. Vince agreed. "It would be best if we could send them off to their own island where we could keep an eye on them. Alas, we don't have the means to secure such accommodations for them at the moment. I doubt the palace has the luxury of spending resources looking for such a location right now. In which case, our only option is to use the one you claimed for your own, Leon. Is that acceptable to you?"
His Majesty glared at Mr. Vince. Evidently, unlike the king, *he* didn't think the loss of the royal ship was my responsibility. It was a relief to see him on my side, but it pained me to lose the land I'd been cultivating into an ideal home.
Although… Wait a minute. Maybe it's better for me to get rid of my territory? Outwardly, it'll look like I have nothing left. That's a good thing, isn't it? I straightened. "If that means you'll spare their lives, I don't mind."
"Why would you go so far to protect the prince and his friends?" Minister Bernard asked. "Pardon me for asking, but what drives you to do something like this?"
I contemplated for a moment. I could give him the answer he wanted to hear, but I'd learned by now that kissing up to people got me the opposite of what I wanted. Better to be honest.
"I'm tired of being a noble. I don't need a viscount title. Honestly, I'd like to return it all. I'm content to spend my life peacefully as a baronet."
"Interesting." Mr. Vince stared at me, but I had no idea what was going through his head.
"I already lost my airship and my Armor. The way I am now, I'm of no value to you, so I'm content to start over from the beginning. I guess the reason I want to help them is because, for better or worse, I just can't leave them alone."
The three listened intently, each wearing a serious expression.
"Just can't leave them alone, hmm? The prince has certainly found a good friend in you. Your Majesty, do you agree to the terms we have discussed?" Minister Bernard glanced over at the king.
He seemed lost in thought. "Huh? Uh, yeah. Sure. I'll see to it they're pardoned."
Mr. Vince motioned for me to go. "All right then. We'll take care of things here. Seems we've put a lot on your shoulders."
"You've got that right." I shook my head. "So please, save me this time. I want to enjoy my retirement in peace."
"Retirement at your age? Well, you do have a point. We'll be sure to compensate you for all you have done."

Being frank with them had paid off. In fact, I was anxiously looking forward to the repayment he promised.

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“Well, everything you lost we can recover quickly enough,” said Luxion. He and I were in my room, speaking privately.
“Don’t say that. Losing that island was a big blow. We finally started harvesting rice, and I was ready to move on to making miso and soy sauce next.”
“I’m surprised they actually accepted your retirement.”
I shrugged. “I think it’s more they didn’t know what to do with me. It works for them either way. They probably don’t think I’m a threat anymore.”
“You seem happy.”
“Eh, I dunno.” Things hadn’t ended entirely the way I’d pictured, but it wasn’t all bad. My efforts had at least paid off. “And now that I’m returning to life as a background character, maybe I should consider going adventuring.”
“I will accompany you, in that case. You couldn’t do a thing without me.”
I shot him a look. “You don’t have any manners.”
But now that I was free, I could use Luxion’s main ship to go on a trip. I was sick of dealing with other people’s messes. Although… *Hold on a sec…*
Spending some quiet days back home wouldn’t be too bad either. Nicks, the second oldest son—well, actually the oldest now that we knew Rutart wasn’t legitimate—was the new heir. I could spend my time helping him out.
“My life has only just begun.”
“If it’s only just begun, what would you call everything you have been doing up until this point?” Luxion asked snidely.
Flailing, honestly. I’d been in a panic ever since Zola tried to sell me off to that perverted old bat.
“First, I have to graduate.” I paused. “Wait, is the academy even going to resume classes?”
“I haven’t confirmed as much, but based on the situation at the capital, I doubt things will be the same as they were even if it does immediately reopen.”
The door to my room swung open, and Livia raced in, panicked. “Leon, I heard you’re leaving the nobility?!” She was gasping for air, completely winded.
“You already heard about that?” I motioned for her to sit, but she refused.
“The viscount title and lower-fourth court ranking never suited me. I already ceded my territory, and even if I did gain independence, the best I could hope for is a knighthood. Although they’re pretty much already treating me like a knight anyway.”
“B-but you worked so hard. This is too cruel. And after what Angie put herself through…”

“Angie? She worried about me, too? Tell her it’s fine. This is how I wanted things.”
“No, that’s not it.” Her gaze fell to the floor, fingers clutching at her skirt as the tears began to well up. “She prostrated herself in front of Marie to try to save you. Now it’s blown up into this huge problem. Now on top of that, you’re losing your titles, too!”
“She…she did what?”

***

Angie’s father had summoned her to the palace, where he was taking care of things in the wake of the war, to question her about what had transpired at the academy.
“I’m disappointed in you,” he said.
“I know.”
She, the daughter of a duke, had prostrated herself in the academy plaza before hundreds of students.
“You denigrated our house’s name.”
“I know.”
She’d done it for Leon, and although she had no regrets, she knew it was unacceptable behavior for a member of Redgrave House.
Her father continued. “The man in whom you saw so much potential has lost all standing. Territory, status, and every honor that came with it. That’s the kind of person for whom you tarnished our house’s reputation. How am I supposed to deal with this?”
Angie had no words. It was up to her father to decide what to do. But if he wanted her to say *something*, then… “Are you going to ask me to take my own life?”
“You’re resolute, I’ll give you that.” He gazed up at the ceiling. “I can’t have a daughter like you in my house. I’ll prepare a fitting husband for you, so make preparations to leave our estate.”
As far as punishments went, this was considerably kind.
“Very well,” Angie mumbled.
Her father smiled. “Aren’t you curious who it is?”
“Who?” She didn’t care for reasons of the heart but for reasons of the head—she needed to look into this man to prepare herself for dealing with him.
“Some idiot knight who relinquished all of his titles, ranking, and territory,” said her father. “The fool wishes to retire even though he’s still so young, but I think he’ll be a perfect partner for you.”
“Pardon?”
“Our house will be looking after the both of you. I’ve heard all about your other friend, as well. She may be treated as an official mistress.”
Angie’s mouth parted. Her father had done a thorough investigation if he knew *that* much about their relationship. She bowed her head low, prompting him to laugh. “Th-thank you so much!”

“It’s not completely set in stone yet. I still need to speak with the groom—”
Before he could finish, Gilbert came flying into the room. “Father!”
“No need to shout.”
“Th-there’s a big problem. Leon is—”

***

“Let me goooo! Her head…her head is mine!” I tightened my grip on my sword, brandishing it through the air of the dungeons.
Marie trembled in the far corner of her cell, pleading for her life. “Wait! It’s not my fault. Everyone else got carried away and made her prostrate herself!”
“Finished talking? Good, now give me your head. I’ll be merciful and lop it off with one swing.”
Knights and soldiers tried to hold me back.
“Please calm down!”
“Viscount, lower your weapon!”
“We understand how you feel, but please cool your head!”
The palace had already decided on the punishments for Marie’s lovers, so they’d been dragged out and lectured for their poor judgment. Marie was the only one down here now. And I couldn’t let her get away with what she’d done.
“I was an idiot for showing you any compassion!” I bellowed. “You can repay me with your life!”
“You’re the one who said you’d save me!” Marie wailed.
“You honestly think I’d forgive you after you made Livia and Angie get down on their hands and knees? I’m going to pass judgment on you right here!” I waded forward, dragging the knights and soldiers behind me.
Footsteps echoed from the stairwell, and two people raced into the dungeons from behind me. Livia and Angie.
“Leon, wait. Calm down!”
“You idiot, what are you thinking?!”
I pointed at Marie. “I want her head.”
They both gaped.
“You want her head?” Livia drew her brows. “But why?”
I drew my arm over my eyes, wiping them. I felt so guilty for making the two of them endure such humiliation that the tears wouldn’t stop. “I’m going to give it to you two as a present.”
“Leon, I don’t need her head,” said Angie. “Now calm down. This acting out isn’t doing you any favors.”
Oh… But if she didn’t want Marie’s head, what could I give her?
The soldiers and knights still holding me back all volubly agreed with Angie and tried to disarm me. But any fondness I’d felt for Marie was long gone. If nothing else, I at least had to get rid of her with my own two hands. I’d been

cleaning up after her since my previous life. As her (former) older brother, it was my duty to behead her.
As I continued to struggle against them, an alarmed Queen Mylene came racing down the steps. “Leon, wait right there!”
The moron patrol was hot on her heels. In the blink of an eye, the five of them had me surrounded, and the knights and soldiers fell back.
“Bartfort, have you lost your mind?!” Prince Julius demanded.
“Not as badly as you have!” I snapped.
Marie ran to them, crying. “Save me! He’s trying to take my head!”
Greg grabbed my arm. “Bartfort, I can’t believe you! I won’t allow you to do that!”
Chris snatched the sword from my hands. “You won’t put a single finger on her!”
“Stand down!” Jilk demanded from in front of her cell.
Brad grabbed me by the neck and tried to drag me away. “They already decided on her punishment. What are you throwing a fit about?!”
“I don’t wanna hear that from you! Let me go! Luxion, unleash your attack!”
“Are you sure about this?” Luxion asked.
“Do it already! They’re getting in my way, so don’t show them any mercy!”
“As you wish.”
An electric wave shot out of his body, sending a numbing shock through all of us.
“Gyaaaaaaah!”
Six strangled cries echoed through the dungeon as we all collapsed.
“Y-you bastard,” I rasped. “You weren’t supposed to get me caught up…in it…”

***

When I came to, I found myself lying on a couch. Queen Mylene sat nearby, along with Livia and Angie. Relief washed over their faces when I opened my eyes, but just as quickly they looked annoyed.
“Unbelievable. I wondered what it could possibly be when I heard all the fuss.”
I gave her an imploring look. “Your Majesty, I want Marie’s head.”
She drew her brows together, troubled by my pleading. My plan to trigger her mothering instincts seemed to be working, but alas.
“I’m sorry, but once a punishment has been decided, it’s difficult to overturn. I regret being unable to honor your request after all you have done for us, but we must keep the Saint alive.”
Angie scanned me up and down. “What’s with you all of a sudden? Didn’t you want to save her so badly that you offered up your own territory?”
“She made you two prostrate yourselves.”
Livia’s dropped her gaze. “Well, we did that because—”

“Oh, you just learned about that?” Queen Mylene’s eyes widened. “I thought you knew. That’s why I followed their example when asking for a favor.”
Marie, that brat. This isn’t Japan! What was she thinking, spreading a custom like this?!
I sat on the couch with my knees drawn up to my chest.
“Leon, can we talk?” asked Angie.
“About what?” I glanced up.
Angie and Livia were holding hands.
“The cruel truth.”

Chapter 13:
Game Complete

MARIE WORE a sour expression. A guard had been sent to lead her out of the dungeon, and she now sat in a guest room.
“They’re shipping me off to the countryside? Yuck,” she grumbled.
“That’s the kind of attitude you’re going to take after I saved you?”
The two of us were speaking privately because I still had a lot I wanted to ask her. That was part of the reason I’d worked so hard to keep her around—I wanted to know more about what happened to our parents. After I recovered my calm, I realized killing her would only make them sad. I still couldn’t forgive her on a personal level, though, and I’d relish the chance to beat the crap out of the idiot brigade, given the opportunity.
Wait. If I punched them now, no one would hold it against me, right?
“I’m the type of girl that shines best in the city!” Marie wailed.
I cocked my head. “Are you going to complain about the land I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into?”
“You need to stop yearning for an easy life in the countryside. That’s what makes you so negative and pessimistic all the time.”
There is nothing negative or pessimistic about wanting an easy life in the countryside, thank you very much. “The only good thing you did in your previous life was give our parents a grandchild,” I snapped at her. “Other than that, I pity them for having a daughter like you.”
“Like you have room to talk. You died on them!”
“It’s your fault I died!”
“You were always grinning from ear to ear playing dating sims with hot girls in them! No one would normally die from marathoning a video game like that!”
“*You* were always grinning from ear to ear playing dating sims with dudes in them!”
“It’s your fault!” said Marie.
“No, it’s yours!”
Luxion drifted nearby, completely disinterested.
“Luxion, tell her it was her fault for trying to get the reverse harem ending. Tell her she’s the one who made a mess of everything!”
“You’re the one who kept the villainess *and* the protagonist at your side!”
I glared at her. “Our relationship is pure! Unlike yours!”
“That’s because you’re a stupid chicken who lacks the guts to make a move!”
“Luxion! Hurry up and tell her how pitiful she is—she’s the one in the wrong!”
Marie shot a look at Luxion. “Go ahead, round thingy, tell my pitiful, good-for-nothing brother he’s the one in the wrong here!”

His eye shifted between the two of us. “In that case, allow me to voice my opinion. I pity your parents for being stuck with two children like you.”
You jerk. That’s what you have to say?! Seriously? But all my anger ebbed away, replaced by guilt.
Marie whispered, “Hey, isn’t he a bit harsh? Can’t he read the room?”
“He hits you right where it hurts, doesn’t he? I didn’t really want him to be the voice of reason here.”
“Perhaps it hurts because it’s the truth?” Luxion turned toward Marie. “Allow me to ask you this, could you look your daughter in the face after all you have done?”
Marie clutched her chest. “B-but she’s not even here right now. Pl-plus, even after I left her with our parents, I still talked to her some. I know she wouldn’t abandon me.”
Huh, so she actually has some self-awareness as a parent?
“She was so sweet. When we’d eat together, she would worry about me and say, ‘Mom, are you taking care of yourself?’”
Sounds like my niece is growing up right. It was hard knowing I couldn’t do anything more for her and my parents than wish for their happiness.
“If she knew that her mother had seduced five men—six, if we include your slave—to create a reverse harem, I’m sure it would make her cry,” said Luxion.
Marie fell to her knees in shock.
I burst out laughing, arms wrapped around my belly. “See? I told you! You’re a real jerk!”
“Master, you’re no better.”
“Huh?!”
“Both Angelica and Olivia have confessed to you, and you keep running from them,” he said. “Quit playing games and make up your mind.”

***

Luxion was referring to the day Angie and Livia had summoned me to the garden on the palace rooftop. There, they stood in front of me, fidgeting, so much so that they made me nervous, too.
I barely had time to appreciate the beauty of the sunset before Angie, staring straight at me, blurted, “Leon, I love you.”
I swallowed a breath.
“I don’t know when it happened,” she went on, “but at some point, I started thinking more about you than the prince. Being with you was fun. Comfortable.”
My mouth gaped uselessly.
Angie smiled, her face glowing. “I love you,” she repeated.
This was the second confession I’d ever received in my life. And standing beside Angie was the person who’d given me my first—Livia. I awkwardly turned my head and glanced at Livia. She was smiling.

Oh, crap. I don't know what this is supposed to mean. Why is she smiling? Should I call Luxion for backup?
I scanned the area, hoping to turn to him for assistance. Instead, I found a white, sphere-shaped lookalike.
"Who the hell are you?!" I demanded.
"You can call me Cleare. Haven't seen you for a spell."
She was talking like we'd met before. Although that robotic, feminine voice did sound familiar… In fact, it sounded just like the AI we'd encountered in the ruins on the elves' homeland.
"Where's Luxion?!"
"I had him excuse himself, since his presence would only be a hindrance. I told him, 'It will put your master in a real bind if you're not here with him.' He was all too eager to leave after that."
That jerk really does have a twisted personality.
"Leon," Livia said.
"Y-yeah?!" I straightened and turned toward her.
"I still love you just as much now as I did before. I'm confident no one feels as strongly for you as I do."
"R-right." Although I blurted it out as if I understood what she meant, this situation was not at all what I'd imagined. Never in my life had I dreamed two different people would confess to me at the same time.
"So please let us hear your answer. We want to know."
Angie put her hand over her chest and said, "It doesn't matter whether it's Livia or me—or someone else, for that matter. We won't hold it against you no matter who you choose, or even if you decide not to choose us at all. But tell us how you feel."
Could I make a run for it? But they were both being so completely sincere! I summoned my courage.
A gust of air rippled their hair. Bathed in the light of the evening sun, they both had a divine glow.
I threw my arms wide open and declared, "I love you both!"
They each smiled at me, then slapped me across the face.

***

It had been incredible. Angie was the first to strike me, and then Livia's hand whipped across my opposite cheek. Perfect coordination.
"You truly are scum," Luxion said in the present.
"Come on. This may be my second life, but it's the first time I've ever had *two* cute girls confess to me."
That hypocritical brat Marie wrinkled her nose at me. "Unbelievable. You *are* scum."
"Oh? Does the girl having an affair with six different men have something she wants to say to me?"

Her expression soured, but she sniffed. “I’m trying to reflect on what I did. Having a reverse harem is way harder than I thought—*and* more miserable. I’ve been wanting to end it.”
Now that I knew she’d come into this world with only a fragment of knowledge about the game, her actions made more sense. The two of us had been operating with completely different pools of information. Now here she was with a position as the Saint and six boys to look after.
“I do feel bad for you there,” I admitted.
Evidently, Marie wanted to break off her relationship with all of them except Kyle. Unfortunately, the five heirs had taken her rejection the wrong way and insisted, *We’ll make you fall for us someday*. Now she was saddled with five guys who had no future.
Seriously, we were both failures.
“Well, good luck,” I said. “I’m not going to have anything to do with it, though.”
Her eyes widened. “What?”
“I went above and beyond what was expected of me,” I explained. “I had no idea Miss Hertrude had a little sister. And it was a pain trying to clean up after your messes.” I’d done my best. No, more than that.
“Little sister? You mean Hertrauda?”
“Yep. And this situation went off the plot of the original games in more ways than that. I guess my mistake was assuming this place was exactly the same as the game world. Anyway, I saved the country when it was in danger. My job ends here.”
I couldn’t accomplish any more than I already had, right? Technically, I’d completed the game, although the protagonist hadn’t ended up with anyone, and instead Marie had all six boys. Still, this wasn’t a *bad* ending. It was a bit odd, all things considered, but I’d safely cleared all the battles and events.
Marie stared at me as if surprised before nodding to herself. “I’m guessing you don’t know this, but…”
Then she proceeded to reveal the truth about this world—a truth I had known nothing about.

***

A few days later, a large crowd gathered at the capital’s cemetery to mourn those who had fallen in battle. They were family, friends, lovers—survivors. A grim reminder of what war wrought. Winning wasn’t an end; it was a beginning.
I gazed out at the people from a carriage window after the ceremony had come to a close.
“My apologies to your family, but I wanted to talk to you in private. Though it’s too bad I couldn’t be younger for you.” Queen Mylene was seated across from me.

“Those are some barbed words,” I said. “Are you angry with me?”
“You’re always like this. You flash a smile at everyone and keep whatever is bothering you all to yourself. There are bags under your eyes, you know.”
I wiped a hand over my face. I hadn’t slept at all last night. *Maybe I should ask Luxion to get me some sleeping pills.*
“Truly, thank you for all you did for us. There’s just one ceremony left.”
The days had been packed with events lately, from parties to celebrate our victory to various other functions.
“You mean regarding my reward and the removal of my titles?”
“Yes,” she said. “However temporary, you were our commander-in-chief. And you did bring us victory.”
As far as the public was concerned, I was receiving a colossal reward. I had offered a lot up to the kingdom, so they had to make it seem like they were compensating me for all of it. Otherwise, it would reflect badly on them. If they weren’t strict about rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior, it could cause unrest.
“Of course, it’s the first time anyone has ever requested a demotion as their reward,” Her Majesty continued.
Although it would be impossible to remove all of my titles at once, they would take them away gradually over the years until I was a simple knight.
“A viscount title and lower-fourth court ranking are too much responsibility for me,” I said. “I lost my territory, so being a simple knight suits me perfectly. Plus, I won’t be of any use to you anymore. Not when I can’t use the *Partner* or Arroganz.”
Guilt flashed across her face.
“I’m only paying you back for what you said earlier,” I teased.
She started pouting and turned her head away.
Gosh, she really is adorable. Makes me want to throw my arms around her.
“As for your other request, we don’t have a problem honoring it.”
“Good.” I leaned back in my seat. Things were going perfectly for me.
“There’s just one thing—about your Lost Items,” said the queen. “Can’t they be repaired?”
“I did recover them, but it looks like they’re beyond salvaging. I’ll keep them stored in my factory for now.”
Her face softened. “I really have depended on you far too much. If there’s ever anything I can do, just say the word. As long as it’s within my power, I will do what I can for you.”
Erotic thoughts popped up into my head for a moment—really, just a few seconds—before I could dismiss. them. She was the queen. If I put my hands on her, the king would have my head.
“I’ll keep that in mind and hold you to it eventually.” I grinned. “Keeps things more interesting that way.”
“All right. I have a lot to pay you back for.”
The two of us continued with some idle small talk as the palace came into view from our carriage.

Time to tackle my last job here, I guess.

***

My family was gathered with me in a waiting room, busily making preparations. Since Father had participated in the battle as well, he was moving to upper-sixth ranking.
“I-Is this all right?” he asked.
“You’ve got the buttons all wrong,” Mother said as she fixed his disheveled clothes.
Elsewhere, Nicks was standing before a mirror, checking his appearance.
“Why do I have to attend?” he grumbled. “If Father and Leon are going out there, they don’t need me.”
I clapped him on the back. “You’re the heir now, right? Be glad your first real battle ended in an overwhelming victory.”
“But I didn’t even do anything! And besides that, what’s going to happen to our older brother, Rutart? I mean, I guess we’re not actually related… But I’m still curious what’s going to happen to their family.”
Zola and her children had nothing left now—during the battle, an airship had fallen on the estate Father had bought for her. In fact, the whole capital was in shambles and would be busy rebuilding for a while, even with Armors available to help with construction.
“Since he fled in the face of battle, the palace has revoked Rutart’s knighthood,” I said. “Now that Zola’s lost her titles as well, I guess they’ll be treating him the same as a commoner.”
When Father abandoned Zola, she’d had no choice but to return to her own family. The family had tried to run during the conflict, and as a result, they’d lost everything, from titles to status. A number of aristocratic households had been similarly wiped out, actually.
“You know an awful lot about all of this.” Nicks quirked a brow.
“Queen Mylene told me.”
His expression soured. “Why are you so chummy with the queen? I want to think you wouldn’t be stupid enough to do this, but just in case—don’t put your hands on her, okay? Seriously. I mean it, you better not! I don’t need to get dragged into any more trouble because of you.”
How rude. Even I know not to mess with the queen.
“Anyway, what about our dear sister?” I asked. “She’s usually all too eager to participate in ceremonies like this.”
“Jenna’s holed up back at the house. She threw a fit because Father lopped off her servant’s head. Miss Yumeria is looking after her.”
Honestly, I’m pretty sure she’d come right back out if you bought her a new slave.
Although perhaps that wasn’t an option, with the rules at the academy undergoing a huge change. Talks were still ongoing, but they were considering abolishing the personal servant system. Miauler framing me

had caused quite the fuss. Also male students had appealed *en masse* to get rid of them. Women's grudges were fearsome, but men's were no less terrifying. They were collectively pressing for a reevaluation of the school rules.
A knock fell upon the door.
Looks like it's time. "All right, off to fulfill my last job, then."
This really would be the end.

***

A red carpet extended down the middle of the audience chamber's floor, leading to the throne. I took a knee before the king and waited. His movements were ceremonious and theatrical as he praised the nobles who'd participated in the war.
Hurry up and finish already.
As if reading my thoughts, the king said, "Viscount Leon Fou Bartfort—no, Earl Bartfort! First, I relieve you of your duties as commander-in-chief. And now I do hereby bestow on you the title of earl and with it, lower-third court ranking!"
Murmurs broke out among the gathered nobles.
I stared down at the floor, eyes wide as saucers. *This idiot! What is he saying?!*
"Y-Your Majesty, please permit me to speak!" I blurted, my head spinning.
He stroked his beard as he gazed down at me. "Very well, speak."
"I am truly grateful for your generosity, but might I inquire as to why you are granting me such a title and ranking? I am still so young. Such status seems far beyond…" My voice trailed off as I struggled for words. I basically just wanted to scream, *I can't be a freakin' earl! And your court ranking crap doesn't do me any good either!*
Audible whispers drifted from the crowd. Evidently a host of people agreed with me.
"An earl? At that age?"
"The upstart sure has ascended the social ladder."
"I've never heard of someone achieving an earldom in a single generation."
"Lower-third? That's basically the highest ranking there is."
Indeed, upper-third ranked in the same class as cabinet ministers. The only ones above that were the royal family.
I don't want that kind of status!
If someone suddenly walked up to a kid in high school and told him, *Starting tomorrow, you'll be a cabinet minister in the government,* the kid would naturally respond, *What the heck?* I mean, right? It was like inviting an intern to be on the board of directors! I couldn't handle that kinda responsibility! I couldn't do that work!
When I lifted my head, His Majesty—that bastard Roland—smirked. "After all you have accomplished, we must see that you are suitably rewarded. It's

only fitting to grant you such a title and rank. Please, you needn't worry. Knowing how competent you are, I am sure you will be perfectly capable of continuing to provide the quality of contributions expected of someone with your new status."

Great, thanks, I'm glad you think so highly of me. Excuse me while I barf all over your stupid carpet!

The king *knew*. He knew I didn't want this—that was exactly why he'd done it. The other officials were clearly confused. Even Queen Mylene gaped from shock.

You decided to promote me all on your own, you rotten snake.

Before I could protest further, Roland beat me to the punch. "Are there any present who find my decision disagreeable?"

No one spoke up.

Even if some found it displeasing, revoking the decision now would only cause more trouble. If they didn't promote me, it would set a bad precedent; it might even discourage people from accomplishing things in the name of the kingdom if they thought their efforts would go unrewarded. Especially given the caliber of my achievements. If *I* didn't get promoted, then no one ever would.

"Earl Bartfort, I look forward to seeing what you'll do in the future," said the king.

"Y-you honor me."

It would be so much more satisfying if I could howl, *Screw you!* Alas, my family was present. Displaying a poor attitude here would only bring them trouble. And I had already done enough to them.

As Roland sneered, I swore silently that someday, I would have my revenge.

***

When I got back to my family's room in the palace, I went berserk.

"That bastard! I told him I didn't want any more prestige, and then he went out of his way to promote me to earl!" I snatched up one of the cushions from the couch and sent it flying. Mostly because I was too scared to fling anything breakable.

My parents stood nearby, whispering to each other.

"If our son's an earl now, how should we approach him? Should we be more formal?"

"I-I guess? Although, I don't really think he's the type to concern himself with that sort of thing."

"But he's an *earl*, and lower-third court ranking. He's leagues above us."

"Formal it is then."

I whipped around, pointed a finger at the two, and bellowed, "I'm an earl in name only! The palace is just harassing me at this point. Don't you dare get formal with me. Gives me the creeps just thinking about it."

Nicks snapped. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Father could return that factory to you. You’d have more income befitting your station.”
“If that could solve my problems, I wouldn’t be wallowing!”
The factory made a decent amount of money, but it wasn’t enough. An earldom was no joke. The tribute expected from someone of that rank made the factory’s revenue look like chump change.
Father smacked his fist to his palm, face lighting up. “Why not become a palace noble then? You’d get a pension from the government. And you’d have no territory to worry about!”
“Nope. Absolutely not! They’d make me a cabinet minister. I can’t do that kind of job!”
“You have a point. If you became a top official in our government, it’d spell the end for this country.”
I chucked a cushion at my father and stormed out of the room. “I’ll just leave this stupid country altogether!”
Mother peeked out of the room and called after me, “You be home by dinner!”
Yes, ma’am…

***

As I skulked down the palace corridors, a voice rang out: “Hey!”
Angie hiked up her skirt with both hands, careful not to trip as she raced over. She was in a fancy gown today for attending the ceremony. When she finally caught up to me, she was out of breath and her face was red. She must have seen me from a distance—that was the only explanation for how winded she was.
“What was that just now?” she gasped, waving a hand toward the audience chamber. “Did you know about this?”
I shook my head, shoulders slumped. “The king decided it on his own. I wasn’t told anything about it.”
“Well, I do understand why he couldn’t demote you, given the circumstances. And it does benefit the kingdom to bestow you with greater status. But my father didn’t know about it either.”
So that jerk really didn’t consult with anyone, huh? Causing trouble for others must run in the family. Prince Julius was bad enough, but his dad is a douchebag, too.
“What do you think I should do?” I asked her. “I’m in a real bind if they’re serious about this earl business.”
“Hmm. I can see that the status doesn’t do you much good when you don’t have a house or territory. Becoming a palace noble presents its own set of problems, too. It’s probably best if you marry into another family.”
Marry into a family?

“Top-ranking aristocrats can furnish their daughter and her new husband with land and a house. Plus, if you marry into a family, you’ll also have their political support. It’s a win-win.”
As I contemplated this option, another girl in a fine gown suddenly appeared—Clarice.
“Oh, you don’t need to marry into a family,” she said. “You just need to establish a new house for yourself. The kingdom just lost a wide swath of its nobility. Now is your chance to gain independence.”
True, the kingdom had eliminated a number of noble houses in the recent war with the principality. They’d abolished the ones with direct ties to Fanoss, of course, but anyone who ignored their call for aid had also been written out. All that awaited them now was punishment in accordance with the severity of their crimes. But that left a number of ungoverned territories, making it easy for lords in need of land to gain independence.
“Clarice,” Angie sneered. “What do you want?”
“I’m merely pointing out the flaws in your suggestion. It would be scandalous for an earl to marry into another family,” said Clarice.
“Not in Leon’s case. He’s different.”
The two argued as I considered both options. “So marry into someone else’s family or go independent, huh? Doing the former just seems like it’ll lead to the latter either way,” I mumbled to myself.
Deirdre waltzed up to us then, clad in a truly gaudy gown.
“I overheard your conversation. What nonsense are the two of you going on about?” Deirdre asked.
Clarice glared at her. “Kindly stay out of it.”
“You two keep going on about independence as if becoming a regional lord is the only option. You’re thinking too small.”
Angie quirked a brow. “What do you mean by that?”
Deirdre smirked. “Roseblade House is looking to start a branch house—a subdivision of our family. They would live in the capital as a court noble. It’s the perfect opportunity now that so many positions are open. Roseblade House would make all the preparations. As earl, you need only grant your prestige and status.”
In other words, she wanted me to be the head of Roseblade House’s branch family? Wasn’t that basically the same as marrying into another noble house?
The three of them glowered at one another.

Instinct told me it was time to run. As I tiptoed off, I heard a feminine yelp. Naturally, I took off sprinting in that direction. I ran down a stretch of hallway and then turned a corner, where I found Livia on the ground. Apparently, she'd tripped on her own skirt, unaccustomed to such formal wear.

A man stood over her, extending his hand. "Are you injured, young lady?"

"N-no, I'm all right."

"Glad to hear it. May I escort you to that room over there so you can rest?"

Livia's eyes darted back and forth, clearly panicked by the sudden invitation.

I stomped forward to chase the jerk off but balked when I saw the man's face. "Trying to pick up girls in the palace, Your Majesty? Have you no shame?"

"And what exactly is wrong with tha—oh, it's you." A smirk stretched across Roland's face. "Earl Bartfort. How does it feel, having moved up in the world?"

"Like crap. What happened to demoting me? I thought we agreed that giving me more titles would make it harder to remove them later on!"

"Oh, that?" He shrugged. "I considered your request, but it would be too much trouble. You're the hero who saved our country. If I treated you poorly, it would reflect badly on me. After careful contemplation, I decided it would be best to promote you after all."

"But you *are* going to demote me later, right?"

"Certainly. If you do something that warrants a demotion," he said.

This jerk actually gets pleasure from making me miserable. "That's not what we agreed on."

"You're right." The king put a hand over his chest. "It does wound me to do this, but I *do* absolutely loathe you. I swore to myself I wouldn't do anything that would bring you any joy."

You absolute douche. I gaped. You just told me you hate me to my face.

Pleased with himself, Roland waved his arms in an exaggerated manner. "I have a grudge, Earl Bartfort—you took the spotlight from me before the battle started. How dare you use such a suave line like, 'If that is what Your Majesty desires.' I can't let that go. That was my moment to shine, and you stole it from me!"

"Seriously? That's your problem?"

Livia managed to get back on her feet, glancing between the two of us. The nervous look on her face was adorable, but the real problem was the conniving old fart in front of me.

"You were supposed to act flustered so I could tease you and show off what a composed, magnanimous adult I am," His Majesty went on. "You failed me. Then you blew up at the marquess and stole even more of the attention. I was seething."

"You mean you're not upset because I kicked the crap out of your son and tried to seduce your wife?"

He folded his arms over his chest and scrutinized me from head to toe. “You’re a filthy rat, but if that were enough to anger me, I could hardly make it a day here in the palace. It was my son’s own fault for losing to you so miserably. And it’s a bit late for me to be concerned if another man approaches the queen. Although I *would* have you executed if you put a hand on one of my mistresses.”

Seriously? This guy’s a bigger dirtbag than me!

Roland turned his attention back to Livia, a gentlemanly smile on his face as he stretched his hand out once more. “Now come, young lady. Let us enjoy the night together.”

Come to think of it, the queen was basically an enemy to the protagonist in the game, but for some reason, the king was always really accepting and understanding toward her. Who knew it was because he was a nasty pervert with a thing for young girls? I thought this was supposed to be an otome game! Couldn’t the devs have made the king more upright and admirable?!

“If I kick the crap out of you right here, would that earn me a demotion?” I asked through gritted teeth.

He glared at me. “It seems you want me to execute you. Very well then, brat. I’ll call the guards here right now.”

Pretty pathetic that he had to call for backup.

“Your Majesty.” Queen Mylene interrupted, several attendants following along behind her.

Roland scrambled as if to retreat, but I seized him by the arm.

“Unhand me!”

“Where do you think you’re going?” I smirked, keeping a solid grip. The look of utter horror on his face almost made me laugh.

“Y-you! I’ll have your head for this!”

“Queen Mylene,” I whined, “His Majesty is threatening to have me killed. Save me!”

“You were trying to seduce this young girl, and you dared threaten the earl with execution for stopping you?! *He* saved our country. We owe him a great deal. I will not let your behavior go unpunished, not today!”

“N-no,” squeaked the king. “I was merely doing my job as a member of the royal family! It’s my duty to produce children. What’s wrong with me getting involved with young women?!”

“How many mistresses have you taken using that excuse?!” Queen Mylene dragged him off by his ear.

“The evil has been vanquished,” I declared.

Livia gave a strained smile. “Uh, um, Leon, I, um…”

“Hm? Oh, that dress looks great on you, by the way.”

“Thank you. Um, but that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about!” Livia put her hands on her chest and took a deep breath. “It’s about what we discussed before.”

I averted my eyes, but she grabbed my hand.

“Why wouldn’t you answer us honestly?” Livia peered up at me with sad, puppy dog eyes.
How happy would I be if I had a girlfriend or wife like this, I thought to myself dreamily. If nothing else stood in my way, I would eagerly accept confessions from both Angie and Livia. But why did they even like me? And how was a guy like me supposed to pick between them?
“If you aren’t interested in either of us, that’s fine,” she said. “But I want a proper answer.”
Livia was earnest, trying to live her life to the fullest. She clearly put in as much effort as she could. I, on the other hand, had treated this world as a game from the moment I regained my memories. Did I have any right to receive her love? I’d mocked Marie before, but what made the two of us any different?
Livia’s expression hardened, and she took a determined stance. “If you don’t make up your mind, I’ll have to take action.”
“Wh-what?!”
“I’ll do whatever it takes to make you fall in love with me!”
That was an awfully bold declaration. When those five losers had said that to Marie, I’d thought, *What idiots.* But it sounded so suave the way Livia said it. It almost made me want to answer, *Yes, ma’am!* If I were a girl, I’d definitely fall for her in a heartbeat.
“So please stay at my side—forever and ever!” Tears welled in her eyes.
I rubbed the back of my neck. “I’m sorry, but…I can’t.”

Epilogue

SPRING BREAK came a bit early.

After returning home, I made my way to the factory. People and robots were busy at work, with robots performing the manual labor and humans acting as support, handling small, miscellaneous matters. They were all unskilled laborers we'd recruited several months ago, mainly because there were no proficient technicians to hire. It would take a few years of training, but eventually these people would take on more complex roles.

The ship in front of me measured two hundred meters long and was heavily decorated, including a unique horn. It was called the *Einhorn*.

"You really dressed this thing up," I said to Luxion.

"The palace requested we create a ship to represent Holfort Kingdom. One it could be proud of."

"Even after you finish the *Partner*'s repairs, I won't be able to take it out anymore," I said wistfully. "This really sucks. Hm?" I glanced around. "Hey, what happened to Cleare?"

"I left her in the capital. She's taken a liking to Olivia and Angelica."

"That AI's got even more freedom than you do."

"I won't deny that," he said. "Regardless, I see no problems with it. She won't betray us. More importantly, you're the one with a lot of trouble ahead."

The reason Luxion was preparing a new airship was because I was leaving to study abroad.

I sighed. "Who could have dreamed this otome game was only the first installment in a whole series?"

That was a little tidbit I'd learned during my conversation with Marie that day in the palace…

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She'd delivered a shocking revelation that turned my world upside down.

"I'm guessing you don't know this, but…that otome game turned into a whole series."

"It did what now?"

"Hertrauda is a character from the third installment," Marie said, a little pompously.

"Th-there was a third installment?!" I shrieked. "Okay, wait. Hold up just a moment!" If there was a third game, that implied the existence of a second game. *No one ever told me about this!*

"Of course you wouldn't know. You died after clearing the first game. The sequel came out later. And in the third game, Julius's younger brother appears."

“He has a younger brother?!”
Marie snorted. “Yes. The king has a harem, and the other prince is from a different mother. He’s got this tormented, sexy air about him. Almost like some delinquent.”
Yeah, I didn’t really care about that. But I’d seriously thought Julius was the only prince! Although now that she mentioned it, I did seem to recall seeing a kid who matched that description in the audience chamber before.
I guess it would be a problem if they only had one potential heir…
“Does that mean those two monsters I’d never heard anything about before were the final bosses from the third game?” I asked.
“Yup. Incidentally, when the third game begins, Julius and the others are in their third year at the academy. Not only do you get to enjoy the events from the original, there’s even a bonus where you get to see what happens after their graduation!”
Also useless information.
“But wait—the original game covered the third year at the academy,” I said, “and I don’t remember anything about Prince Julius’s younger brother enrolling.”
“What are you talking about? It’s called retcon. They added his character in after the fact. Duh.”
Gee, thanks, little blunt much? “O-okay, well, since I defeated all of the bosses, we’re safe now, right? There’s nothing left to endanger the kingdom, is there?”
She smirked. “The setting for the second game isn’t Holfort. It takes place in the Alzer Republic.”
Hm? I feel like I’ve heard that name somewhere before. “W-wait. Stop right there! That means—”
“The boss from the second game is still alive and well.”
I cradled my head in my hands and slid to my knees on the floor. “Noooo, it can’t be!”
How could this be happening?! There was no way this stupid otome game had a sequel—no way there could be more world-ending danger in the future. Not when I thought it was all supposed to be over!
Marie smirked triumphantly. “Now, let’s negotiate.”
Dammit. She knew things about this world that I didn’t. She probably figured she could use that as leverage against me.
“You’re awfully confident,” I said. “What do you want?”
“Let me think. First…” She suddenly dropped to the floor, prostrating herself. “Give me some financial support, please! I need money for daily life!”
Uh, what now?
“You don’t need my money. The government’s shipping you off to the island. They should be providing everything you need. And that place is already furnished with enough for you to get by.”

“No! They told us we had to make a living ourselves—to see what it’s like to struggle on our own. They did provide us with a number of necessary items, but you remember the five people we’re talking about, right? Kyle and Carla are one thing, but do you honestly think *those* five can farm?”
Well, they *were* spoiled rich kids. Asking them to do farmwork all of a sudden was a tall order.
Wait—Carla’s still sticking by you?
“I promise I’ll send you rice,” she said. “But please give me money for daily expenses! The boys’ houses are all really pissed at them, so I can’t expect any contributions there.”
Apparently the band of boy toys was acting like farmwork would be a walk in the park. Hence her anxiety about their future.
“It’s hopeless,” she said. “My gut tells me that if I leave this to those five, it’ll be a disaster. I mean, they’re saying the same things my ex-boyfriend in Japan said. He was so naive, always thinking he could wiggle his way out of any situation. But he was just relying on *my* income. And they’re just like him!”
My intuition agreed with her. I could easily picture them all failing spectacularly.
That aside, Marie sure is popular with crummy men. Does she just naturally attract the wrong crowd or does being with her turn men into garbage? Maybe she emits some kinda electrical signal that only reels in trashy guys!
Marie gazed up at me, eyes pleading. “I’ll sell you all the info about the games I have, but please give me money!”
I *did* want the information…
“All right, fine. I’ll give you money. Spill what you know about the Alzer Republic.”
Delighted, she lifted herself back to her feet and jumped for joy.
“Hurry up and spit out the info,” I snapped.
She cleared her throat. “Ahem, as the country’s name implies, it’s a republic ruled by an aristocracy. They’re more progressive than the kingdom. Commoners can attend their academy, and that’s where you meet the second game’s love interests.”
So the second game took place at a school as well.
“The protagonist of the second game is a girl descended from a line of high-ranking nobility that had supposedly died off,” Marie continued.
“Hm.”
“By the end of the game, the protagonist is supposed to rebuild her house with one of the love interests, but…”
What she said next left me staring at her, dumbfounded.

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“If the protagonist fails to romance one of the guys, it puts the whole world in danger? Give me a freakin’ break. Enough of this.”

This world was awfully fragile if its doom relied on whether people's love lives worked out or not.
"You're a worrywart, Master."
"I can't stand by if it means the world might end! Dammit. If I had stayed ignorant, I could have enjoyed my second year at the school in peace."
"Indeed, you are a lower-third ranking earl now," said Luxion. "No doubt you have dozens of admirers. And thanks to everything that's happened, the marriage situation for noblemen should improve. You'll be in a more favorable position from now on. It's a shame you have to study abroad."
He was right; the marriage situation had seen a complete reversal. Girls clever enough to sense this shift were already starting to panic.
"If you stayed here, Master, a happy school life would await you."
I shook my head. "It's not like I want to go, but I can't leave things the way they are."
The problem was we didn't know whether anyone else had reincarnated in this world like Marie and me. I hadn't confirmed this one way or another, but if it had happened, they might take the same path as Marie—i.e., making a mess of things and putting the entire world in danger. I couldn't let my guard down. All my efforts would be in vain if some idiot destroyed us all.
"Yeah, about that…I'm just going to keep an eye on things. If nothing fishy is going on, it'll be a normal study abroad experience."
"And what about the language barrier?" Luxion asked.
"I've learned basic greetings, but I can't have a conversation," I admitted.
"I could interpret for you?"
My eye twitched. "Then you should've said that to begin with! I studied my ass off for this!"
"As well you should have."
Just then, Nicks came waltzing in. "Leon, Father wants to speak to you."
"He does?"

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"A wedding ceremony?" I repeated.
"More like an engagement ceremony," said Father, seated in his office. "You have to be there, too, so make preparations."
"Is this for Jenna?"
"Jenna's in no state to be engaged. Your mother reports that she can't even do housework, so we won't be able to marry her off for a while yet. Right now, girls have it harder than men trying to find a partner. If we're going to find someone for Jenna, she'll need some training first."
As Queen Mylene had said, the kingdom had a gender-based population imbalance outside the academy. That naturally put men in a stronger position for marriage. With the new restructuring of marital power within the kingdom, a girl like Jenna had few prospects. Our mother would have to

reeducate her from the ground up. They could probably have found someone using my connections, but my parents thought the idea too crude and refused to entertain it.
So, Father had to be talking about an engagement for Nicks. After all, he was the new heir to our house and was helping my father out with his work. It made sense for him to get married, too, since he'd already graduated.
"But why just an engagement instead of an actual marriage?"
"The situation is complicated. Sorry to spring this on you out of nowhere, but I want you to attend before you leave."
"Sure, that's fine," I said.
"Good. Well, then go get ready."

***

As I left my father's office and started down the stairs, I ran into Jenna—now the oldest daughter of Bartfort House, since Merce wasn't actually my father's child. Miss Yumeria was teaching her how to clean.
"My lady, you have to put in more effort when you're scrubbing. Do it properly, like this."
Jenna watched silently and scowled as she made a vague effort to mimic Miss Yumeria.
"No, not like that! For that part, you're supposed to do it like this." Miss Yumeria's teaching style was positively adorable. It was hard to believe she was old enough to be the mother of a child.
Jenna threw down the rag she was using. "I've had enough of this! This is grunt work. Have the servants do it!"
"B-but they told me to teach you how to clean."
Apparently, Jenna still hadn't grasped her new reality. "Once I go back to the academy, there will be plenty of barony heirs to choose from. I just have to marry one of them. Oh, Leon! Perfect timing. Introduce me to one of your friends. In light of the circumstances, I won't be picky. I'll even accept an heir to a rural region."
Flustered, Miss Yumeria quickly bowed to me.
"It's fine, you don't have to do that." I flashed a gentle smile at Miss Yumeria, then turned a mocking one on Jenna. "You've got some nerve talking to an earl that way. As for my friends, they already have a bunch of girls fawning over them, so they have the luxury of picking whomever they want. They wouldn't even look twice at you."
And boy did I envy them. Now that I was an earl, status was still getting in my way. The only women who came near me were ridiculously high-ranking nobles' daughters. I was happy to have them pamper me, but I could hardly risk playing around with them. I'd be stuck marrying any girl I touched.
"H-how dare you act like that. I'm your older sister!"
"I'd like you to remember I was the one who helped cover for you in spite of the fact that it was *your* slave who framed me."

Since Miauler had cooperated with Marquess Frampton, the palace had wanted to go after my sister as well. I'd used my fortune to get her out of that mess. She chewed on her lip, glaring at me. Her annoyance gave me such joy.
Ah, it's turning out to be a wonderful day.
"Uh, um, my lord? No, that's not right." Miss Yumeria shook her head. "Earl? Hm, that doesn't seem… At any rate, Lord Leon, please have some sympathy for Lady Jenna."
Miss Yumeria's presence was so soothing. While my real sisters were absolute garbage human beings, Miss Yumeria was like an adorable younger sister. Although in reality, she was older than me and had a kid. Still, I liked that she was a bit airheaded. She was so diligent and kind.
Honestly, she's perfect.
"Since Miss Yumeria asked so nicely, I'll let it slide this time, but you better put some effort in. Seriously, if you don't shape up, no one's going to want you."
"I-I'll have my pick of the boys when I get back to the academy, just you wait." Jenna huffed.
"You need to face reality. You're going to have a hell of a time competing." I chuckled at her.
Jenna snatched up the rag she'd flung before and chucked it at me. Her face was burning red with rage—which was absolutely hilarious. I easily evaded her attack, right as our mother walked up.
"Jenna! It seems you still don't understand."
"Mother! Give me a break already!"
As Jenna fled, I stood there and laughed.
The marriage situation was already improving, but if my sister's attitude was any indication, we still had a long way to go.

***

That night in my room, Luxion and I made some idle small talk. I started getting drowsy and wasn't really thinking too much about what I was saying.
"So Nicks is getting engaged?" Luxion asked.
"Yep," I said. "We're gonna have to celebrate."
"Hm. Speaking of, have you decided who you are going to pick? Between Olivia and Angelica."
"How can I do that when I don't know how I feel? Like, I have feelings for both of them, but thinking about getting married is kinda terrifying." I paused to yawn.
"In other words," Luxion said, "you like them both so much you can't choose between them, correct?"
"That's right. That's why I said *both* of them, and when I did, they slapped me. I was being honest. Kinda cruel of them, don't you think?"

“Are you interested in marrying either?”
I shrugged. “It’d be great if I could, but if it were that simple, I wouldn’t be in this predicament, would I? I do like them, but that’s the problem. I want them to be happy, and we don’t suit each other.”
They were both too good for me. I mean, they’d prostrated themselves to save me, right? They deserved better—someone who could make them happy.
“Master, you’re an earl and a hero. I believe you more than suit them.”
“I don’t want to use my status like that. It feels like a disservice to them.”
“If that’s how you feel.” After a short pause, Luxion added, “I am looking forward to tomorrow.”
“Me, too. So let me get some shut-eye. I’m sleepy, and we have to get up first thing in the morning to…” I closed my eyes and let the words hang. As I drifted off, I pictured Livia and Angie’s smiling faces.

***

The next morning, as our family gathered in a waiting room, I found myself dressed in a luxurious suit.
“Isn’t this kinda odd? Nicks is supposed to be the star today, right?”
He was wearing an expensive suit as well, but my attire stood out far more than his.
“Oh, you know. You’re the earl. I’m just a baron’s heir. That’s probably why,” he said.
“That doesn’t make any sense. You’re the one who should be looking dapper today, not me.”
Our younger brother, Colin, peered up at me. “Leo, you look super cool! Like a prince!”
Father stood as stiff as a statue in front of the door. Maybe it was my imagination, but it felt like he kept eyeing me. I scanned the room and noticed my mother fidgeting and wringing her hands.
“Luxion, is it me or is everyone acting strange?”
“They are all simply nervous, I’m sure.”
Well, it was Nicks’s engagement ceremony, so I couldn’t blame them. But something still felt off.
“Aren’t we going to go greet the bride’s family?” I asked.
Nicks turned his face away. “We arranged it this way. We can greet them once the ceremony is over.”
They really are putting this whole event together in a hurry, I thought.
Father glanced at his watch. “It’s about time. All right, let’s go. Leon, this way.”
“Yep, on my way.”
It was my first time attending an engagement ceremony like this. I was kind of excited. Plus, Nicks was the leading man today, so there was no pressure on me. I was looking forward to giving him a good ribbing later.

***

“Father, care to explain?”
“It’s exactly what it looks like.”
The ceremony was being held at a temple, though it more resembled a church from my previous world. A long red carpet lay down the middle of the floor, lined by pews. Among the attendees, Duke Redgrave stood out the most. And for some reason, Nicks went to sit with the rest of the guests.
At the altar stood two girls in pure white dresses.
“You tricked me!” I gasped.
“Don’t make it sound so sinister. I never said it was an engagement ceremony for Nicks. You’re the one who jumped to conclusions.”
It was very clearly Angie and Livia waiting at the end of the aisle. Their faces were hidden beneath veils, but their silhouettes gave them away. To make matters worse, Angie’s father was here, so there would be no running away.
“No one said a word to me about this!”
“That’s because you’re so wishy-washy,” Father snapped. “If we don’t settle things once and for all before you leave, who knows what you’ll get yourself into while you’re off in another country.”
Hey, don’t call me wishy-washy! I just didn’t want to get married!
Father glanced over at Mr. Vince. “If you flee, you’ll make the duke and his house look bad.”
“This was a rotten thing to do, setting me up like this!” I froze and turned. “Hold on just a second. Don’t tell me you knew about this, too, Luxion?”
His round, robotic body floated nearby, looking strangely joyful. “I did indeed. Your waffling was pathetic, so I took the liberty of making arrangements for you.”
I can’t believe you’d do something like this to me.
As we squabbled, Gilbert strolled over to us at the entrance. He wore a smile on his face, but the look he gave me wasn’t any kind of happy. “Leon, Angie and her friend are waiting. You can’t leave them standing there forever. Or is Angie not good enough for you?”
“N-no, she’s definitely good enough!” Too good, actually. But I’m a guy! I wanted to play around some! No one said anything to me about getting engaged.
Father knit his brows in a scowl. “I doubt you’re aware, but we received a number of marriage requests regarding you. A mountain of them, frankly. Some of which were absolutely ridiculous. From women in their fifties all the way down to girls who had yet to hit puberty. Even you wouldn’t be interested in either of those.”
Aristocratic society was rotten from the inside out. Women in their fifties were one thing, but girls who hadn’t even hit puberty? They were just kids!
No. Absolutely not.

“If you get engaged to Angie, you won’t have to deal with that mess,” Gilbert added. “And it’s not as if you dislike her, is it?”
I glanced over at Luxion, but he averted his gaze. Little jerk, he went off blabbing about my feelings!
“B-but I’m leaving to study abroad,” I said.
“Exactly, that’s why we decided to hold the engagement ceremony before you leave. We even consulted His Majesty beforehand, and he happily gave his blessing. He also sent a message to pass along.” Gilbert handed me a folded sheet of paper.
I smoothed it out and scanned the page, then promptly crumpled it in my fists. It read:

Welcome to life’s graveyard.
I heard about how you kept running from marriage, so I did eeeeeverything in my power to guide things along so you could get married to those two.
Feel free to weep tears of gratitude at my benevolence.

Fondest regards,
Your highly talented and marvelous king

That dirtbag was *not* going to get away with this.
Father put a hand on my back and pushed me forward. “Get going already! Those two girls are way too good for you. In fact, you’re a real pain in the butt, and you should thank them for taking a man like you. What’s there to waffle about? Be happy! Hurry up and get married! You’ll drive me nuts if you keep beating around the bush like this.”
Exactly, they are too good for me! That’s why I didn’t agree to be with either of them!
As I stared around the hall, I caught Mr. Vince’s gaze. His eyes terrified me enough to take my first step forward.
As I inched down the carpet, applause broke out. Nicks looked away when I peered at him. Jenna grinned like the cat that got the cream as she clapped, reveling in my misery. Miss Yumeria applauded as well, tears welling in her eyes.
And my mother? She wept, of course. “I can’t believe my useless son has been blessed with such wonderful fiancées.”
Ouch, that kinda stings.
Even my parents’ faces, the ones from my previous life, popped into my head.
When I came to a stop in front of the two girls, Angie whispered, “Sorry for springing this on you without any warning.”
“Yeah,” I said, “couldn’t you have talked to me about it first?”
Staring at the floor, Livia replied primly, “You kept giving us the runaround.”
Come on, I’m not even in my second year. Maybe the reason I thought it was too early for marriage was because my mind still expected things to

work like they had back in Japan. “You never know,” I said. “You might get fed up and wish you’d never gone through with this.”
Livia smiled. “That won’t happen.”
“A-and I might be an earl, but I’m not bringing in that much money.”
Without missing a beat, Angie said, “Then I’ll support you. Don’t worry. I am the daughter of a duke, after all. My house has promised to supply whatever is necessary for my independence. And I’m certainly educated enough to earn money for all of us.”
That was shockingly swoon-worthy of her.
Angie glanced at the exit. “If you want to run, there’s the door.”
“Even if I run, hell’s all that awaits me.” Going through with this would be hell and going back would be hell…right? “What even made you girls fall for someone like me?”
“I fell because you’re you,” said Angie. “I want you, Leon. Be my husband.”
Yup, still swoon-worthy. “Y-yes, ma’am.”
Livia stepped up beside me. “That’s right, we love you *because* of who you are. And now I won’t let go no matter what happens.”
Okay, that was a bit yandere, but still.
“Well, do whatever you want,” I said. “I’m not going to run.”
“Okay, I will!” Livia grinned at me from beneath the veil.
Well, it’s not like I dislike either of them. In fact, I like them. Love them, even.
The only regret I had was not being able to play around more as a student.
The priest said some congratulatory words, but they went in one ear and out the other.
It wasn’t so bad after all—being tricked like this.

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“Congratulations on your engagement,” said Luxion.
“That’s all you have to say to me, you piece of junk?”
“Oh? Don’t you think it a bit cruel to blame me? I merely gave those girls a push forward. I told them if they backed you into a corner, it would all work out.”
Luxion and Cleare had worked together to pull the wool over my eyes. Sure, I was happy that I didn’t have to hunt down a partner anymore…at least until I heard about the messy details of this whole situation afterward.
“I’m engaged, so why do I have to keep up this courtship crap?”
Luxion and Cleare exchanged glances, then promptly twisted their bodies from side to side like they were shaking their heads in exasperation.
“Master, you’re a hero—the kingdom’s savior. The ruling class needs you to help rebuild.”
“You may even be able to build a harem if you’re interested,” added Cleare.
“Good for you!”

“No, not good for me! The girls in this country hated my guts up until now. Having them kiss up to me feels weird! No, it’s terrifying! I can only imagine they have ulterior motives!”
“Don’t worry. The situation isn’t shifting *that* rapidly,” said Luxion. “I suspect it will take about twenty years for true change to sink in.”
That wasn’t half as reassuring as he thought it was. That meant there would still be a bunch of girls looking down their nose at men, right?
This world really is tough on guys.
“And even though I just got engaged, I’m immediately leaving to study abroad. It feels like I just got married, but I’m going off by myself on a job transfer.”
Cleare giggled. “I’ll be staying here, so you needn’t worry.”
The AI in the ruins had seemed extremely serious, but now that she was in a little robot body, her personality had softened quite a bit. *Maybe something about being inserted into a remote unit changed her?*
A knock sounded on the door to my room.
“It’s open,” I said.
“Sorry to barge in.” Livia stood there, dressed in pajamas with a pillow in her arms.
“Hmph. You haven’t even made preparations to welcome us in here.” Angie was beside her.
“Aaaaahhhh?!”
“Why are you screaming?”
I leaped off my bed, shocked at seeing them both. “B-because! It’s nighttime, and you’re both in your PJs!”
In fact, on closer inspection, their nightwear consisted of inviting negligees.
“You’re going to be leaving soon to study abroad,” said Livia, “so we wanted to…you know…”
Oh, please don’t finish that sentence. I’m a guy, you know. I want to do it. But at the same time, I can’t shake the thought of the consequences. “G-girls, we can’t!”
Angie cocked her head. “Why not?”
Oh, crap. We’re totally not on the same wavelength here. “I’d like you to wait a bit longer. I need to prepare myself mentally.”
“What nonsense are you going on about? Livia just wants us to talk.”
“Huh…?” *Oh. Talk. She just wants to… So no sex?* I pointed a finger at my chest. “You want to talk? To me? Tonight?”
“Um, yes, there’s a lot I’d like to talk about. We’ve been so busy up until now, we couldn’t really settle down and have a proper chat,” said Livia. She was giving me those sad, puppy dog eyes again.
It was too adorable to resist, so I acquiesced. “All right.”
I admit, I’m a little disappointed, but I’ll keep that to myself. Okay, no, that’s a lie—I’m actually really disappointed.
“What did you think we were here for?” Angie gave me a teasing look.
I averted my eyes. “I was just thinking about love.”

“Oh, love, huh? Good. I would be delighted to hear what you think of it.”
What is love, anyway? Even I don’t have an answer for that.
Angie and Livia settled down on my bed, close enough for their skin to brush up against mine. Luxion and Cleare had disappeared off somewhere. The two of them really were no help.
“I didn’t get a chance to thank you before,” Angie said.
“That’s right,” Livia added, “so much has happened since I first met you at the academy. You saved me so many times.”
Yeah, it was rough. Namely thanks to my sister and those five lovesick idiots. “Well, I had Luxion by my side. It wasn’t like I did it all alone.”
“You’re wrong about that,” said Angie. “Luxion only helped us because of *you*. Leon, you need to have more confidence in yourself. You’re going to be my husband someday.”
Hearing her say that almost made me blush. I still wasn’t used to hearing the word *husband*. I’d never married in my previous life.
“Leon, please come back to us safely,” said Livia. “We’ll be waiting here for you.”
I wrapped my arms around them both, and we talked late into the night. It was absolute torture.

***

The day of my departure, a crowd of people gathered to see me off on an island floating above the royal capital. Daniel and Raymond couldn’t hide their grins.
“It’s too bad you have to leave. Especially since the girls were sending you so many invitations.”
“Who knew we’d end up on the receiving end after all this time.”
Their delighted faces really pissed me off. It wasn’t like I didn’t want to return to school and enjoy our new, more favorable circumstances. I’d really been looking forward to it.
“You’ll both pay for this when I get back,” I said.
“Now you’re showing your true colors.”
“Honestly, it’s comforting to see you act like normal. I was afraid you’d say something like, ‘I’m an earl now! Bow before me!’ or something.”
You guys really have me pegged all wrong, don’t you? I’m appalled. Especially because I’m such an upstanding and kind young man.
Two girls approached us. One of them was Clarice, and the other was Deirdre, who had just graduated from the academy.
“Congrats on your engagement,” said Clarice with a smile.
Deirdre shook her head, frowning. “Yes, I suppose congratulations are in order. It really is a shame, though.”
I had no idea what was going through their heads, but their followers glowered at me. Were they angry with me for getting engaged? I sure was

popular in my second life. I doubted I'd ever be lucky enough to receive this much attention again.
"If you ever get tired of Redgrave House, you're welcome to rely on Atlee House at any time," said Clarice.
What's she insinuating?
"Oh?" Deirdre crossed her arms. "Well, Roseblade House would be happy to welcome you right now. In fact, why not simply take me with you? We could elope."
Hey, hey! If I did something like that, I'd be in an even worse boat than Prince Julius and the jerk squad.
The earnest gleam in Deirdre's eyes surely had to be my imagination… right?
"Y-you two sure tell some funny jokes! Really funny!" I tried to play it off with a laugh, but neither of them smiled.
Sensing the awkwardness, Daniel and Raymond both stepped away, whispering.
"Leon sure is popular."
"You got that right. I can't say I envy him, though."
Thankfully, a savior appeared at that exact moment—my master. He looked so majestic. It was almost blinding.
"Master!"
"Mister Leon, I came to see you off."
"Thank you!"
Master was actually taking over as the headmaster of the academy starting this year. The institution was making sweeping changes, and they needed an appropriate figurehead at the top. Naturally, they appointed the perfect gentleman.
"It will be a good experience for you, going to see the rest of the world. Make sure you learn a lot while you're there."
In all honesty, I was only going there to spy on someone else's love life, but I could hardly tell him that. "I will continue studying tea while I'm away," I said.
"Glad to hear it. I also hope you'll continue to grow as a gentleman—no, as a person. I look forward to seeing how you mature."
Master, I'll aim to become as gentlemanly as you!
Luxion interrupted, "Master, it's time for us to depart."
"Yeah, I guess we should get going."
I boarded the *Einhorn*, never bothering to look back at those gathered to see me off. And it was definitely *not* because Clarice and Deirdre scared the crap out of me. It was because I was on the verge of tears. Honestly, I swear.

***

Cleare had remained at the academy with Livia and Angie. “Are you sure you made the right decision by not going to see him off?”
Angie sipped her tea. “If we broke down in tears in front of other people, it would only trouble him more.”
“Plus, we already said our farewells,” added Livia.
“How dedicated,” Cleare teased. “Master sure found himself two amazing fiancées.”
Angie lowered her cup and glanced out the window. The distinct form of the *Einhorn* loomed in the distance as it departed from the harbor. “There’s one other reason,” she said. “The two of us have something else to do.”
Livia nodded.
“You have something planned?” Cleare asked.
“I want to be of use to him. I plan to study hard, so he can rely on me in the future if he needs,” said Livia.
“Indeed,” said Angie. “He never showed any interest in foreign countries before and even said he didn’t want to go. Yet out of nowhere, he suddenly decided to study abroad. There has to be a reason for it, right?”
Unable to tell them the truth, Cleare kept her answer vague. “I’m sure he has his reasons.”
“I get the feeling he’s hiding something from us, and the only reason he won’t share is because he doesn’t think he can depend on us. In that case, we need to become people he *can* rely on,” said Angie.
“Hm…I applaud your enthusiasm, but I don’t think you need to get yourselves worked up over it,” said Cleare.
Livia smiled at her. “We know. But we want to be the ones to help him out next time. And in order to do that, we have a lot of studying to do. We want to give him a good surprise when he comes back from the republic.”
Cleare’s eye turned to the books on the table. Livia had a tome about magic in front of her, while Angie had one open about regional management. “It would depend on the circumstances, but if you want to pass along a message, just let me know. I can send it along through that sourpuss, Luxion.”
Angie’s face lit up. “Really? Then if an opportunity comes up to message him, we’ll be sure to let you know.”
Livia turned to gaze out the window. “I wonder what Leon is up to right now.”

***

Once I got to my private room on the *Einhorn,* I plopped down on my bed. “Dammit! My departure went smooth and all, but I really don’t wanna go overseaaaas!” I whined and flailed like a child.
I’d never had much interest in foreign countries to begin with, yet to my chagrin, I was sailing off to study in one.
“You really don’t know when to let things go,” said Luxion.

“At least let me complain about it. Why do I have to go overseas and watch over someone else’s love life, huh?!” If this new protagonist didn’t succeed in making one of her love interests fall for her, we were all doomed. Why was this world so ridiculously absurd?
“Yes, well, circumstances aside, why don’t you come over here?” Luxion hovered close to a large box. In fact, its size was so out of the ordinary that it even *looked* suspicious.
“What is that?”
“Something the palace sent.”
I stroked my chin. “They did say they’d give me a souvenir to take along to the republic.”
“Only you would call tribute between countries a ‘souvenir.’ But I digress, this package is addressed directly to you, Master.”
I folded the flaps back to find Marie sitting inside, her legs pulled up to her chest.

It was like a scene straight out of a horror film. I promptly folded the box shut again.
Marie immediately burst right out of it. “Why are you closing me back in?!”
“Because that was so terrifying I was sweating bullets!” *Why is she here?!* I stared at Luxion. If his lack of surprise was any indication, he’d known about this beforehand.
“It’s best you hear it from Marie,” he said.
I turned back to her.
She pressed her two index fingers together, fidgeting. “Th-the truth is…all the money you sent is gone.”
“Gone?”
“It wasn’t me! I wasn’t the one who used it! It was those five stupidheads.”

***

The floating island Leon had donated to the kingdom had been relocated to hover over one of the regions the kingdom controlled. The plan was for Marie and her five lovers to live there from this spring onward. But out of nowhere, a *slight* problem had sprung up.
“What is this?” Marie gasped.
In front of the mansion Leon had built was a towering object covered by a large sheet.
Julius grinned and promptly removed the fabric. “We had this installed for you. I thought you’d be pleased with it.”
It was a statue of Marie looking like some kind of goddess.
Wh-what the heck is this thing?! No, seriously, what?!
Jilk gazed up at it reverently. “We had a young but skilled craftsman make it for us.”
Brad nodded, clearly pleased with how it had turned out. “He kept trying to add more volume to the chest. We had trouble getting him to adjust it to the proper size.”
Examining it closely, she realized it was about as flat as she was. Oh, come on! I have a bigger chest than that! Are you sure you didn’t have him shave off too much? No, wait. That’s not the point. There’s a more pressing question here.
“S-so just how did you guys manage to afford this?”
Greg gave her a thumbs-up. “We tried pooling our money together, but we were still a bit short. This is a skilled craftsman we’re talkin’ about here. So we sold a bunch of stuff on the island to cover the rest.”
In other words, they had pawned off all the precious farm equipment and extra food provisions Leon had sent. They figured if they were left wanting for anything, they could just ask their families to send over whatever they needed.
No way. Is that why they came to the island before I did? You’ve gotta be kidding me!

Marie had prostrated herself in front of Leon to get that money, and these five had used it all up without even bothering to ask about where it had come from or what it was for.
Unashamed, Chris said, “Since our families are giving us money every month, this was a cheap investment.”
The five of them proceeded to gush about how they were eventually going to have a water fountain installed in the statue. They clearly thought the money had come from their respective houses.
“Your families aren’t sending us any money!” Marie blurted.
They tilted their heads at her.
Kyle shook his head, disgusted. “You would have to be delusional to think they would send you anything after how much you pissed them off. The money you used was meant to last the rest of our lives, to cover our daily expenses.”
Carla, who’d been carrying Marie’s luggage, gaped in disbelief. “Y-you used that money? All of it?! That was an enormous fortune!”
Julius furrowed his brows, puzzled. “Was it really? Well, we can just contact the palace and request extra for our budget.”
Their view of life was too far removed from Marie’s. The whole world seemed to darken before her. *Now that they don’t have money anymore, they’re just parasites!* She cradled her head in her hands and collapsed to her knees. She was too steeped in despair to worry about getting her skirt dirty. *Th-this can’t be happening. After begging and bargaining, I finally got us enough money to cover our expenses* and *provisions to keep us fed!*
Leon had sent her other goods and resources as well, stuff for her to sell periodically when merchant ships came in. The equipment here was supposed to help them plant and harvest so they could sell crops and bring in extra money. Marie had figured it would take more than a year to make enough off the land for them to live off of, which was why she’d sought Leon’s help to start them off.
“If it were as easy as contacting the palace, I wouldn’t be in this mess to begin wiiiith!” Marie bawled.
Kyle and Carla rushed to her side, trying to comfort her.

***

Marie paled, staring down at the ground. “I didn’t even do anything wrong, but the queen lectured me over it anyway.”
“That is rough. Even I feel for you.”
Apparently when she’d heard they wouldn’t be able to make it on their own, Queen Mylene summoned Marie to the palace to give her an earful. Of course, I hadn’t honestly expected those boys to learn the value of money in such a short span of time. They’d been spoiled rich kids from birth. Getting them to suddenly scrimp and save was an impossible ask when they were used to swimming in wealth.

“She said it was a mistake to throw us out on our own like that, so she told us to go study abroad. I figured you were going as well, so it couldn’t hurt.”
So she was coming along with me to the republic? Hold up. That means I have to look out for her? And those five walking disasters?!
“What? Where are the others?” I asked.
“In the storeroom. Oh, and this…” She handed me a couple of letters.
The first one I ripped open was from Roland:

Make sure you deal with these troublemakers.

I crumpled it in my fists. The next one I opened carefully since it was addressed to me from Queen Mylene:

Please take care of Julius and the others. Also, to tell the truth…

There were apparently those in power who couldn’t let what Marie and the others had done slide. The palace wanted to send them abroad temporarily for their own safety. According to the queen, they were so busy trying to rebuild, they didn’t have time to waste looking after Prince Julius and his friends.
You know what? Screw it. I don’t need to bother calling him a prince anymore. Julius is good enough. He was already removed from the line of the succession.
Actually, maybe studying abroad wasn’t such a bad idea. If I’d stayed behind, I might have gotten wrapped up in everything the palace was trying to take care of, whether I wanted to or not.
In her letter, Queen Mylene also expressed concern for my well-being. It almost brought me to tears. I wasn’t going to let that bastard Roland get away with the crap he’d pulled, but I did hope Her Majesty would find happiness.
“Hm? There’s one more. Who’s this from?”
“Hertrude,” said Marie.

***

I stepped out onto the deck to read Hertrude’s letter. It started off with a simple greeting. I thought she might say something about resenting me for killing the Black Knight, but she didn’t even mention him. What she said instead was:

Maybe if I had brought you over to my side, things could have ended differently.

A painful life now lay ahead of her. The only reason the palace had left her alive was because it was more convenient to have Fanoss House rule over

the region that had been newly reincorporated into the kingdom. Instead of executing her and appointing someone else, it would be easier to marry her off to someone like Julius and have her bear his heir. There was also less likelihood of her retainers rebelling if the kingdom took that route.

I keep thinking about what that elder from the elf village said to me. I'm sure I must have made the wrong decision, she wrote.

Everyone, Hertrude included, seemed to expect too much of me. I was only an average man who happened to get my hands on Luxion. Even then, I hadn't mastered using him.

I turned to Luxion as he floated beside me, and asked, "Do you ever think you'd rather serve a more talented master than me?"

"Talented or not, I despise the new humans and their descendants. Skill is not something I expect from you."

"You really are a jerk." I plopped down onto the deck and slipped Hertrude's letter in my pocket. "So…a foreign country, huh? I wonder what it'll be like."

I wasn't too excited about whatever lay in store in the Alzer Republic. This was the sequel to that stupid otome game, after all.

Give me a freakin' break…

Bonus Chapter:
Trude and Rauda

IN THE TERRITORIES of Fanoss House, a new gravestone was erected beside the one for Hertrude's parents—for her little sister, Hertrauda. Flowers decorated the grave, yet Hertrude approached with a bouquet of her own. Her maids stood a few feet away, as well as some knights of her personal guard.

"I finally made it here to see you, Rauda."

She had been busy in the wake of the principality's defeat. Following her demotion from princess to duke's daughter, Hertrude acted as the representative for her region. She hadn't yet had time to visit her sister's grave.

Tears trickled down her cheeks. "Why did things have to happen like this? I should have been the one who died. But here I am alive, and you're gone."

If things had gone to plan, Rauda would have lived. But Rauda's maids and guards now looked after Hertrude instead.

"Everyone is gone. Mother, Father, even Vandel. Now that I don't even have you anymore, I'm all alone."

The sisters had decided from a young age to use the Magic Flutes to exact revenge on the kingdom. They had known the price. Hertrude had volunteered to go first in hopes of protecting her younger sister.

"It should have been me… And yet here I am."

It had been just the two of them for so long, after they lost their parents. They'd fought, of course they had, but they had always made up right away. Rauda was so precious to Hertrude; she'd wanted her little sister to live on.

The day before Hertrude rode off to declare war on the kingdom, Rauda came to her room, demanding they sleep together, like they had as children. Hertrude indulged her, and the two had shared a bed for the first time in years. Even now, Hertrude could remember how Rauda cried when she left.

"If only I'd been more mature, more capable…" Because now Hertrude knew the truth—that their retainers had manipulated them. She cried, clinging to her little sister's tombstone. "Rauda, I'm sorry. I was so powerless that you had to sacrifice yourself. I'm so, so sorry."

Where had they messed up so badly?

The servants kept silent as Hertrude sobbed onto her sister's grave. Still, after a while, a man sent directly from the kingdom checked his pocket watch. "Representative Fanoss," he called, "it's about time we leave."

Those around him, all from the former principality, protested.

"At least give her a break when she's visiting her family's graves!"

"Surely you know how long Lady Hertrude has waited to come here."

"You kingdom people have no compassion."

The man's expression turned cold. "If we delay government affairs here, it will cause disruptions in the capital. And the only reason she has any time at all to visit is because we permitted it. She should be grateful."
Not much time had passed since the war's end. The man from the kingdom didn't have much sympathy for Fanoss House. "Thousands died when you invaded our lands. You brought this upon yourselves," he went on. As far as he was concerned, the only reason the kingdom hadn't wiped out Fanoss House was because it would cause more issues. They were doing Hertrude a favor by keeping her alive.
Hertrude wiped her tears, stood, and started toward the carriage. "My apologies. Let's go back."
The servants loyal to her lowered their eyes, vexed at their powerlessness.
The man from the kingdom snorted. "Indeed, you have caused enough trouble. You'd best be obedient from now on. Although I doubt resistance would do much for you in your current state."
"You bastard!" One of the knights pulled a fist back, ready to swing, but Hertrude stopped him.
"Enough! I am sorry for keeping you waiting. Let's hurry back to the castle." She hastened her steps toward the carriage.
The man sneered at the knight. "If anything happens to me, they'll send Earl Bartfort here instead. You sure you can handle him?" Pleased with his threat, the man spun around and marched off.
Hertrude, though, wasn't impressed. *Pathetic coward, trying to use Earl Bartfort's name to intimidate us.* Leon wouldn't invade Fanoss over something so minute.
As she climbed into the carriage, she recalled the adventure she'd shared with him. It hadn't been all that exciting. They had only explored some old ruins near the elves' village, but she looked fondly on the memory.
Oh…that's right, that elder told me something back then… Something about walking beside my fated partner. Leon sprang to mind as Hertrude pictured the fortune the old woman had foretold. If I had tried harder to bring him over to my side…maybe things would have worked out differently.
Perhaps Rauda would still be alive, and perhaps the principality wouldn't have fallen. Hertrude briefly entertained the daydream but shook her head. *I can't think of that right now. I have to keep my head on my shoulders.* Fanoss House needed her. She couldn't waste any more time lamenting how things had turned out.
As her family's graves receded in the distance, Hertrude silently called out to them. *Rauda, Vandel, now that you're with Mother and Father, I want you to watch over us.*

Afterword

THANK YOU for purchasing the third installment of *Trapped in a Dating Sim: The World of Otome Games Is Tough for Mobs*. I am the writer, Yomu Mishima. The only reason this volume even made it to print is because of your support. I appreciate all of you. And what a thick volume it is! (Oops…) When I was writing it, I found myself thinking, *Is the page count on this thing going to be all right? Forget it, just keep writing!* And you can see how that turned out. If you line up the first three volumes, they take up as much space as a normal series would with four volumes. Well, you're getting good bang for your buck, right?

Now, let's talk about Volume Three. There were a lot of reveals this time about the otome game Leon is trapped in. We found out the reason why marriage is so warped and why the elves and other demi-human races were created. Through the battle with the principality, we also discovered what set all this into motion. And Leon got a surprise reunion with his little sister from his previous world—something I'm sure he's not entirely happy about. He's probably cradling his head in his hands, feeling guilty for leaving his parents behind the way he did.

I'm particularly attached to Volume Three, or Part Three as it's known in the web version. There were developments for a lot of characters that might change how people perceived them. I was both scared and excited to see how the light novel version was received. I added more content to the novel version, including changing the part about Leon getting wrapped up in the power struggle. There might be some discrepancies for those of you who continue reading the web version instead of the light novel, but I hope you'll read and enjoy the light novel as something separate from the web version.

Speaking of differences, I struggled over what to do with Hertrauda up until the very end. While I was writing, I found her to be such a tragic character. She shows up only briefly before dying. But in the end, I decided to stick with the way I'd handled it in the web version. I did feel a bit of regret when I got the rough sketches for the characters, though. I thought, *Maybe I should have gone in a different direction after all*. I feel even more attached to my characters after seeing drawings of them.

Maybe someday I can write an alternate route for Hertrauda. Anyway, I hope you will continue to support me!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PRINCIPALITY OF FANOSS

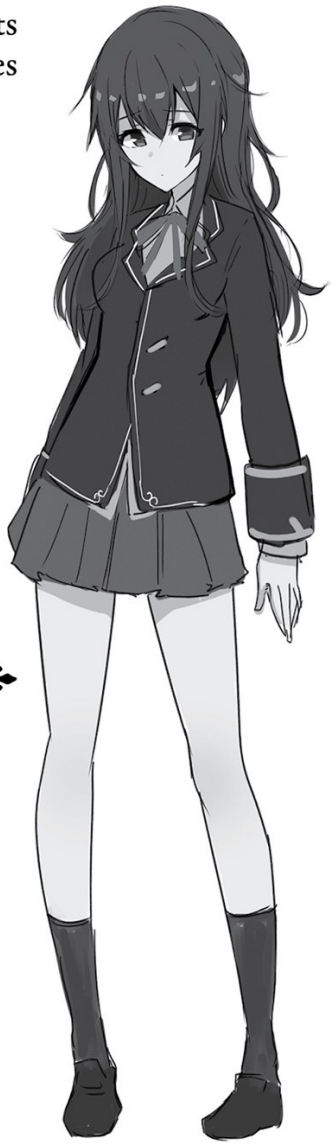
HERTRAUDA SERA FANOSS

The Principality of Fanoss's second princess. Blood sister of the first princess, Hertrude. The princesses greatly resemble one another, but Hertrauda has more skill with the Magic Flute.

HOLFORT KINGDOM

KYLE

Marie's bratty personal servant. Looks like a full-blooded elf despite only being half-elven. Fulfills his duties, but acts pompous and relies on Marie.



CARLA FOU WAYNE

Second daughter of a baronet. Her family served Offrey House until the kingdom exterminated the Offreys for consorting with pirates. With no other backing at the academy, she is treated with contempt as a traitor.

HOLFORT KINGDOM

DANIEL FOU DURLAND

One of Leon's close friends. A nice young man with short hair. Muscular and active in sports. Also has a healthy tan.

RAYMOND FOU ARKIN

Another of Leon's close friends. Looks like the intelligent type with his glasses and fair skin. Prefers the indoors and has a terribly twisted personality.

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